City of Westminster.

BUCKINGHAM PALACE ROAD LENDING LIBRARY.

Only Borrowers or responsible messengers admitted to the shelves. Books will not be entrusted to messengers considered unfit to take proper care of them.

Hours. Weekdays, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., except Wednesdays (10 a.m. to 2 p.m.). Entrance barrier shut five minutes before closing time. Closed on Sundays and public holidays.

Fifteen days (including days of issue and return) allowed for reading this book. Fine of one half-penny per day or portion of a day if detained longer. Books cannot be exchanged on day of issue.

Renewals. Any book (except a work of fiction) may, on presentation at the Library, be re-borrowed for a further period of fifteen days, unless required by another reader. Books cannot be renewed by post.

Care of books. Books must be kept clean, and protected from wet weather. Leaves must not be turned down, nor pencil or other marks made thereon. Any damage done to books will be charged to the last borrower. Books selected should therefore be examined by borrowers and attention called to any damage before leaving the Library.

Change of residence, either of borrowers or their guarantors, must be notified immediately.

Lost tickets to be notified as soon as possible. Borrowers are responsible for any books borrowed on their tickets, which are not transferable.

Satchels or bags and, in wet weather, **umbrellas** must be left with the attendant.

Stocktaking. All books must be returned on or before the THIRD SATURDAY IN JULY OF EACH YEAR, as the Lending Library is then closed for examination of stock. In default of such return a fine of **one shilling** will be incurred.

Stock

Infectious disease. IF INFECTIOUS DISEASE SHOULD BREAK OUT IN YOUR HOUSE DO NOT RETURN THIS BOOK, BUT AT ONCE INFORM THE LIBRARIAN. PENALTY FOR INFRINGEMENT OF THIS REGULATION, OR FOR KNOWINGLY PERMITTING THE BOOK TO BE EXPOSED TO INFECTION, £5.

LONDON BOROUGH OF LEWISHAM
LIBRARY SERVICE

Author

Title

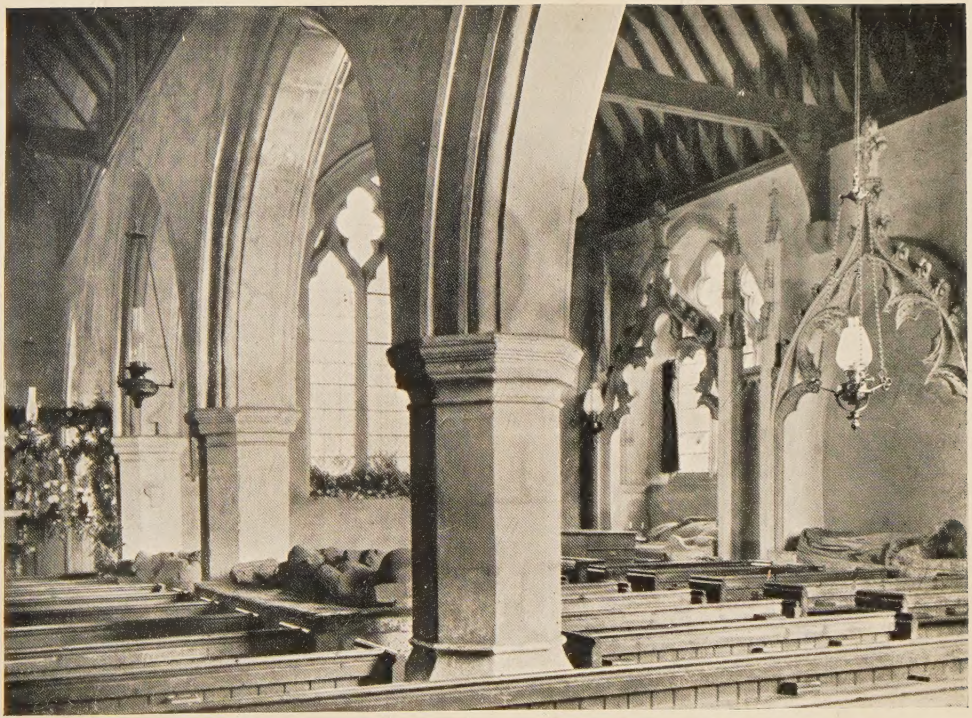
BOOK STORE

Books or discs must be returned on or before the last date stamped on label or on card in book pocket. Books or discs can be renewed by telephone, letter or personal call unless required by another reader. After library hours use the Ansafone Service (01-698 7347). For hours of opening and charges see notices at the above branch, but note that all lending departments close at 1 pm on Wednesday and all libraries are closed on Sundays, Good Friday, Christmas Day, Bank Holidays and Saturdays prior to Bank Holidays.

METROPOLITAN
SPECIAL COLLECTION

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026

https://archive.org/details/untravelledberks0000ls



ALDWORTH CHURCH.

[*Frontispiece*

942

UNTRAVELLED BERKSHIRE

By L. S.

ILLUSTRATIONS FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY
WALTON ADAMS

LONDON
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & COMPANY, LTD.
1909

942.29 S1

5475 H

Q 22623

TO

THE MEMORY OF SOME DAYS

IN BERKSHIRE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

PAGE

A STORY OF THE DOWNS 1

CHAPTER II

A BERKSHIRE SHEEP-FAIR 13

CHAPTER III

TWO PICTURESQUE VILLAGES 24

CHAPTER IV

NEWBURY 34

CHAPTER V

IN THE COUNTRY OF KING ALFRED THE GREAT . . 47

CHAPTER VI

FARINGDON 66

CHAPTER VII

PAGE

TOM BROWN'S COUNTRY 83

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE VALLEY OF THE KENNET . . . 96

CHAPTER IX

SOME STRANGE STORIES 108

CHAPTER X

THE ROD-BEDS 122

CHAPTER XI

HOOP-CUTTING 128

CHAPTER XII

A ROMANY SETTLEMENT 134

CHAPTER XIII

BUCKLEBURY 142

CHAPTER XIV

BERKSHIRE REVELS 159

CHAPTER XV

PAGE
ODDS AND ENDS OF BERKSHIRE LORE . . . 169

CHAPTER XVI

BLEWBURY 175

CHAPTER XVII

SCRAPS OF VILLAGE LIFE 203

ILLUSTRATIONS

ALDWORTH CHURCH . . . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

HAGBOURNE 24

LAMBOURNE CHURCH 48

SHEFFORD 56

LAMBOURNE 64

FARINGDON 66

FARINGDON CHURCH 80

THE LOCK, MIDGHAM 96

WOOLHAMPTON VILLAGE 108

THE ROD-BEDS, MIDGHAM 122

ALDERMASTON WOODS 134

FIR-WOODS, NEAR ALDERMASTON . . . 138

FISH POND, BUCKLEBURY . . . 142

THE OLD HOUSE, BUCKLEBURY . . . 146

BUCKLEBURY COMMON 148

ALMSHOUSE, BLEWBURY 178

UNTRAVELLED BERKSHIRE

CHAPTER I

A STORY OF THE DOWNS

IT is one of the characteristics of the Royal County, and one perhaps that it shares with no other, that while some portions of it are closely in touch with the centre of civilisation, the great hub of the universe, other parts, not so very remote either, for the last fifty years appear to have stood still, remaining so primitive that their inhabitants might never have heard of anything so modern as a railway train.

From Windsor Castle, or Reading, to one of the little villages upon the Berkshire Downs, for instance, seems a very far cry in the matter of condition, civilisation, and progress. So indeed it is, yet in a surprisingly short time a bicycle or motor will carry you from either Windsor or Reading to many old-world villages, which are full of ancient cottages, beautiful churches, and picturesque corners, such as would delight the soul of the artist or the antiquary, or even of the humble admirer of beauty who is neither one nor the other.

You can hear the whistle of the train, which is only a little distance off, yet the loneliness and quiet of these little villages tucked away upon the Berkshire Downs makes you feel as if you had burst upon some undiscovered spot; you experience something of the joy of the explorer, and can fancy that you have actually found something for yourself—something, indeed, that no one else knows about. In some cases the fancy is not altogether an illusion. For as yet of some of these villages few people have heard; while the number of people who have seen them is fewer still.

Perched high up on the Downs is Aldworth, about two miles from the station of Compton on the Great Western Railway line, a small place where dwells a romance. Much of the beauty and the delight of it lie in the very fact of its being so little known, in these days when the tourist and his guide-book are omnipresent. Not so very long ago you might ask in the shops in Newbury, which is only ten miles off, for photographs of the church at Aldworth and be stared at; yet this church at Aldworth possesses a very definite and quite unique interest.

You leave the train at the little wayside station of Compton. Only one other person, may be an old farmer, alights also, and he is not going in your direction. There is no chance of a lift with his horse and cart. Better still, perhaps you have travelled all the way upon your bicycle. As I wheeled mine up the hill, I overtook a wagon loaded with hay. The

load was heavy, and the horse was going slowly; his pace suited mine, and I entered into conversation with the man walking beside the cart. He was a red-faced typical chawbacon, good-natured seemingly, with decided opinions of his own upon some subjects.

"What a lot o' people there is out of work nowadays," he said presently, as we trudged up the hill together, "men with wives and little uns."

"Why is it, do you think?" I asked, hoping perhaps to have some fresh light thrown upon the difficult problem from one who knew.

"Well, lots of 'em won't work."

I remarked that I thought a man with a wife and children who would not work ought to be punished —to which he made reply:

"I shan't never get married; a single life is best."

I wondered, as I looked at his round red face, whether he had failed to appear pleasing in the eyes of all the village maidens, or perhaps, like many another, he shirked responsibilities; he would not care to have a wife and children dependent upon him,—I made the suggestion tentatively.

"I shan't never get married," he repeated doggedly; "it's best to be single."

We walked silently for some time, each chewing the cud of our separate reflections; the carter with many "come ups" and other ejaculations urging his horse along the incline.

"'E's done three journeys a'ready, and 'e's got

another un to do afore 'e's finished; four miles on and back agen!"

I thought that the horse would be tired, I said; the man I knew would have a lift on the empty cart.

"Oh, I dunno—'e's used to't."

Was he an old horse?

"No, nine year old. 'E's going by train to-morrow."

I did not quite understand, and asked if he minded the train.

"I dunno—it don't matter whether 'e minds or not, 'e's got to go;" whereupon my bucolic companion proceeded to explain that his master was a haulier, also that he did a good deal of "that sort of work," buying and selling of horses. "There's one 'as gone to 'es last home, the beginning o' the week, I knows."

Why, and how? I inquired.

"'Cos 'e won't get the grub 'e's bin used to; 'e'll get nothin' but rough stuff."

Pity smote my heart; was he an old horse, I asked.

"Oh yes, 'e was over twenty years old—I've druv en mysel' for seven year."

Here, I thought, was a soft spot in this apparently unimpressionable nature: the man probably became attached to his animals. He was sorry to part with the old horse, I surmised; I should have grown fond of it myself after having driven it for so long.

"No," he returned; "it wouldn't do for all on us to be like that," which was true; it might be inconvenient.

After that there was no remark for some minutes; then, "It must be awk'ard for 'em when they're bad, and can't speak," and following the train of my companion's reflections, which after all had been on much the same lines as my own, less subtle perhaps, but with the same conclusion, I knew that he referred to the horses. I had very nearly done the man an injustice in my thoughts; I experienced a little pang of remorse.

We were nearly at the top of the second hill, and there the carter told me our ways were to part. He was becoming quite communicative. His master, he informed me, often bought London 'bus horses; "but they won't work when they gets down 'ere." One can understand it. They miss their companions in harness, the traffic, and the noise; they feel lonesome, doubtless, and strange. They miss, too, the bell, meaning to them a halt, the conductor's "Oxford Circus" and "Walham Green." It was so, we were told, when they were taken out to South Africa for the Boer War. Animals are such creatures of habit. The 'bus horses were well cared for, I suggested; they always looked fat. "Ah, you mustn't go by a horse looking fat," was the somewhat depressing retort. I had my doubts about this, and my thoughts went back to the old horse who, after having worked for one master for twenty years, was then sold for a paltry £8 10s. and sent probably to his "last home" "because he wouldn't get the 'grub' he's used to." "Poor old fellow, it was a shame to send him away!" I said, as

I gave a parting pat to the horse who was also to be sold the next day, and bade the carter "good-morning."

"Ah, well," he said, "they must go if there's money to be got for them."

Then I went on my journey alone, and presently the mystery of the Downs descended upon me.

The road from Compton to Aldworth is bleak and desolate as you ascend the Downs. But far away and all around the swelling upland seems to be partitioned out into squares like a chessboard. Some of the squares are golden with standing corn; some are full of shocks; some are green with turnips and swedes; others are brown and bare. Here and there are sheep in pens. Before your eyes is spread out almost a panorama. Bounding it are the hills, blue and pearl-grey, and purple in the distance. And brooding over all is the sky, while beyond where you can see you know there are more downs, more golden corn, and more sheep.

The road winds on. Here and there stands a solitary yew-tree, still marking the spot that was once a dwelling of man. Far off you can distinguish the figure of a shepherd and hear the sharp bark of his dog. But you do not meet a human being during your walk. Then suddenly you come upon the church whither your steps are bent. It stands upon the top of a hill that is shaped like a promontory of land; nestling close by, almost within its shadow, are two or three cottages, thatched and creeper-covered.

Just inside the churchyard, battered and beaten by

the storms of perhaps eight centuries, stands a yew-tree. It is thought to be older even than the church; its girth is so great that it is said to take seven men to span it. A wonderful old tree, grand and awe-inspiring. Little of it remains now save the grey bulging broken trunk, and a few branches, most of them broken and dead. Stay for a moment to marvel, then pass on into the church. And when you have opened the door, the key of which you obtain from the Vicarage hard by, you may stand quite still and hold your breath with wonder.

You have been prepared doubtless to a certain extent for what you will see; what you are not prepared for is the strange feeling that comes over you, a feeling so strong, and yet so indescribable. It is as though you had been suddenly received into the atmosphere of the Middle Ages. An invisible but almost a tangible presence envelops you. With this overpowering sense upon you, you pass down into the church.

Absolute silence enfolds the place. Outside not a bird is singing. You seem to have wandered away out of the world as you know it into the presence of the dead of a past age, a mighty presence; dead, and carved in stone, and yet alive in a subtle and spiritual atmosphere, which you can actually feel. It has not been affected or disturbed, this strange atmosphere, by whole centuries of weekly worshippers. You know they meet there, the villagers, every Sunday. There are their books, their hassocks; some one has even left a glove in one of the pews. It all makes no diffe-

rence. The atmosphere remains for all time. Nothing can touch it, or alter it; it is too strong for that. If it is worth while going some distance to see the tombs, it is worth while going twice the distance to experience the curious sensation caused by their presence.

Those wonderful tombs. The church is so small that they lie all close together, every one within the focus of your eyes as you stand on the chancel steps. Two huge tombs fill nearly the whole of the little nave; six others, all having pointed decorated stone canopies of beautiful workmanship, are down the side of each aisle, north and south. They represent the De la Beche family, in the time of Edward II. possessed of large estates in the neighbourhood. Upon the huge altar tomb, between the nave and the south aisle, lie the effigies of Nicholas de la Beche, the last member of the family, and his wife. He was guardian to the Black Prince and Lieutenant of the Tower, where he was eventually imprisoned for failing to send remittances to the King. Shocking depredations have been committed upon the figures. But the worst injury of all has been done to that of Sir Nicholas himself, whose face has been completely sawn off. Think of it! The story goes that the Vicar of the parish at the time that the mischief was done took it so to heart, and was so distressed, that he resigned his parish! A strong measure certainly; yet one can understand the wrath and disgust which led to its being taken.

One other huge tomb, bearing the figure of a knight,

stands in the nave. Symonds in his Diary, in 1644, says that at the foot of this figure was a "hound sitting on his tayle, whereon a foot lyes, and the dogs are looking towards the west end." But the dogs no longer fix their gaze upon the west end, for at some unknown time they have taken their departure. The six other tombs in the aisle are all canopied. Two of the figures in the church are of women, all the rest with one exception are knights in armour. Well it may be said of them, as has been remarked of the effigies in the Temple Church, "There is pride in every line of their features, in every undulation of their forms, but not personal pride; there is the spirit in them of the soldier, the saint, the feudal ruler, the Catholic Church, and of a soul disdainful of all personal ease and ambition."

The fact that the canopied tombs are more in the style of the fourteenth century than that of an earlier date has led to the conjecture that Nicholas de la Beche caused them to be erected to the memory of his ancestors. Looking at them, one can well imagine that the veneration this knight of the Middle Ages had for his family must almost have amounted to worship. One of the effigies is of gigantic size, and local tradition says that this knight was a giant. The same authority gives the names John Long, John Strong, John Never Fear, and John Fear to the others. The last name belongs to that knight of whom Captain Symonds in his Diary says, "He gave his soule to the Devil, if ever he was buryed in church

or churchyarde"; so, in fulfilment of this dread testament, "He was buryed under the church wall, under an arche." Captain Symonds also says that the Vicar of Aldworth at that time informed him that a pedigree or parchment of the De la Beche family used to hang at the east end of the south aisle, but that it was taken down by the Earl of Leicester to show to Queen Elizabeth when she visited the church during one of her progresses and was never replaced. A curious omission that one cannot but regret.

There is a theory that only those whose effigies, besides the crossed legs, have the sword drawn or partly drawn in the hand, personally engaged in the Crusades; that those who vowed to go, and perhaps executed the vow vicariously, or assisted in the expenses of the war, have the legs crossed, but the hands in the posture of supplication. Supposing the theory to be a correct one, then only two out of the seven De la Beche knights whose effigies are in Aldworth Church actually fought in the Holy Wars, though all of them were apparently personally interested in them.

Outside the church there was on old man mending the road, who smiled at me as I passed, and asked "What do you think of 'our church'?" He himself seems fully impressed with the wonder of it all. John Strong, John Long, John Fear, and John Never Fear have been familiar names to him all his life. He has grown up in their company; so have his father and grandfather before him. The old villager laments the

indignities that the figures have suffered, almost as if they were living people who had been hurt. He speaks of having cut off the dead branches of the old yew-tree as though the lopping of each branch marked an epoch in his life. And so it doubtless does. The old road-mender has also other memories to recall; stories that tempted me to linger at the risk, maybe, of not reaching my destination before nightfall. He remembered the old gallery in the church where, when he was a boy, his grandfather played the bassoon in a band composed besides of bass viol and clarionet, and the note was set by a curious wooden instrument called a pitch-pipe, which was regulated by being pulled in and out. In those good old days Joseph Johnson, the clerk, in whose family this honourable office had been for over one hundred years, sat under the pulpit clothed in a long brown smock reaching to his heels. Each time a hymn had to be given out, down the church he tramped, his hob-nailed boots making a fine clatter, up into the gallery, then, when this onerous duty had been performed, back to his seat again.

Quaint and interesting are these old stories, simple, and pathetic, because of their simplicity; picturesque, certainly, brimful of the poetry of real life, yet, when one is still wrapt in the mystery of that atmosphere of the Middle Ages, they seem strangely modern and just a little out of place. What is one hundred, or even two hundred years ago, compared with five hundred, the time that one was just then living in? So,

bidding the kindly old man "Good-day" and thanking him for his reminiscences, I hurried on across the hills once more. Any other day one would love to hear the stories, though one feels a little sadly that that other day may never come.

CHAPTER II

A BERKSHIRE SHEEP-FAIR

NOT far away as the crow flies, from Aldworth, and about four miles by the road, lies another village of a perfectly different character. Indeed the immense difference in the internal characteristics of the villages strikes one most forcibly in Berkshire. It tends to make the country specially interesting. As you go from one village to another you are never certain what to expect, and the difference appears more marked and more curious the better you get to know the villages. When you leave Aldworth and go on to East Ilsley you will find that the two places have little in common.

East Ilsley is also situated upon the Downs. Its surroundings strike one as bleak and desolate, and even deserted. It would be easy to lose one's way upon the Downs during the daytime; at night one would imagine it would be impossible to find it. No doubt the experience of the gentleman who very nearly had to remain upon the Downs till the morning was not at all a unique one. Sixty years ago East

Ilsley Fair was a very important affair in the neighbourhood, and must on no account be missed. The gentleman in question had been to Odstowe for an antiquarian meeting, which had lasted longer than he anticipated, and before he could get away it was quite dark. East Ilsley Fair took place upon the morrow; he mounted his horse and hurried on. Presently he discovered that he had lost his way, and was in a very dangerous part of the Downs, amongst some old pits near Lockinge. There he wandered about for a long time, at the risk not only of missing the all-important engagement upon the next day, but also of losing his life. At last the joyful sight of a light in a cottage window inspired him with hope once more, and the inmate of the cottage was persuaded for the sum of a shilling to conduct him on to Ilsley.

East Ilsley fairs are not the important events now that they were sixty years ago, but they are still scenes of great activity. In between these times of awakening the village is sleepy and drowsy enough, it is true. Yet one does not receive the impression of life and industry having receded from this village as one does with some of the others. Somehow, the flood-tide of existence seems not to have washed away from Ilsley, leaving it high and dry. The continuity of its former life appears unbroken, while modernity has invaded it in the shape of a training stable.

The Rectory of East Ilsley belonged at one time to Richard Wightwick, the part founder of Pembroke College. Close by at West Ilsley, the Rectory was

in the possession of Mark Antonio de Dominis, who is said to have been the first to account for the phenomenon of the rainbow in his book "De Radiis Visus et Lucis." The admiration and attention of the old divine must often have been attracted to the beautiful vision of the rainbow, in the sky over the Downs. Sunsets and clouds and sky effects can be seen there better than anywhere else.

East Ilsley is a queer little village. At first sight it really appears to consists almost entirely of public-houses. They are "The Star," "The Lamb," "The White Hart," "The Wheatsheaf," "The Swan," "The White Horse," and "The Crown and Horns," besides two or three others. All these in the single street of a little village whose population has never been more than eight hundred, and has now dwindled down to only five hundred. It really sounds rather alarming. East Ilsley, you think, must surely be a place to be avoided—what can the people be like? Wait a minute; if you are thus hasty in your judgment you will be doing the poor innocent Ilsleyites a grievous wrong. They are probably no better and no worse than the inhabitants of any other village. The reason for this extraordinary predominance of public-houses is not to be found in any unusual vice upon their part, or to any peculiar addiction to drink; it is due to something quite different,—the existence of the sheep-fairs. The sheep-fair of East Ilsley is one of the most important and one of the most ancient in England. The charter for its establishment was granted as long ago as the

reign of Henry III., and, as the public-houses would not exist were it not for the sheep-fairs, so the sheep-fairs could not possibly get on at all without the public-houses. Over the Downs and from far away the shepherds have to travel and drive their sheep, and as the fair begins early in the morning most of the sheep must be there the night before, and the shepherds and the drovers have to sleep somewhere. So they flock within the hospitable doors of "The Star," "The Lamb," and "The White Horse"—and thus the necessity of the public-houses is accounted for.

The chief fair takes place annually upon August 1st. You must be at East Ilsley by nine o'clock in the morning if you wish to see it in full swing. It is a sight that is well worth an effort of early rising. Perhaps it is a grey day; one of those delicious mornings of late summer when every line is softened, and every tint deepened, and the most commonplace object is rendered beautiful by a veil of haze. As far as the eye can see lie the Downs, bearing upon their bosom an infinity of colour and shade. Golden cornfields, with huge patches of yellow charlock in between, farther on a perfect blaze of scarlet poppies with perhaps a white chalk-pit gleaming near. Encircling it all, the purple line of the everlasting hills, broken here and there by an irregular tuft of trees against the sky. As you wind along the road on your bicycle, or in your motor perhaps (though one must confess the thought even of a motor seems terribly out of place in connection with an East Ilsley sheep-fair), the bleat-

ing of sheep and the barking of dogs tells you that you are approaching the fair. Join the long string of vehicles of every description going in the same direction, swing round a sharp corner, and you will find yourself in the village.

Just at the corner, one of the first things that meets one's eye is a little butcher's shop—not the ordinary one, which certainly could not be called a picturesque object, but a quaint little wooden erection, with its front painted bright green, reminding one curiously of childhood's days, carrying one's memory back to a certain fascinating toy with painted legs of mutton, sirloins of beef, and a little wooden butcher standing at the door with a miniature chopper in his hand. Farther on, this illusion of memory is rendered still more complete. For the small square pens into which the sheep are packed are for all the world like the pens of a mimic farmyard. The crowded, bulky, motionless sheep might so well be those delightful wooden animals, from which one used to be scolded for sucking the paint, because—dreadful thought—that paint was probably poisonous. Still the illusion continues. Stand at the bottom of the hill upon which East Ilsley is built and gaze up the little street, at the quaint buildings and perspective of rudely painted signs swinging from the fronts of the inns. Are you not reminded of those old childish picture-books, John Gilpin, The House that Jack Built, and the rest, long ago consigned to the limbo of all forgotten things. To hear sheep bleating is said to to be a sign of loss, while, apparent contradiction, to

find oneself surrounded by them is lucky, so with this portent of good luck awaiting us, we will hurry on.

In the village all is bustle and life. More than twenty thousand sheep are enclosed in pens upon either side of the street, stretching out, a woolly mass, towards the fields behind. Their number lately has been reduced by about one-half from what it formerly was—the result of the agricultural depression. Every species of sheep is represented. There are the Hampshire Downs, the Sussex and Wiltshire, and a handsome Scotch breed having horns. Thousands of sheep are bleating, hundreds of dogs are barking loudly, some of them held by the shepherds who are watching over the sheep; others are tied to the pens whilst their owners go a little way off to gossip with their friends, or make a voyage of discovery through the fair. The dogs are chiefly of the collie breed; here and there is conspicuous a great English sheep-dog, quieter and more dignified than the somewhat fussy and sometimes mongrel collie.

It is a grey day, there is no sun to scorch, so the sheep have no need of the trees planted at intervals in all the open spaces, wherever the pens are put up. These trees are chiefly chestnuts. The beauty of the scene of a sheep-fair must be greatly increased in the spring when the trees are in blossom.

The passages in between the pens are filled with men in every variety of costume, some of the most picturesque description. Many of the drovers, with their knotted red handkerchiefs and general get-up,

remind one of the London coster. Here you may see a man, one of the dealers, in a velveteen jacket and a soft felt hat, looking as though he were dressed for the stage; there is another in a long white coat reaching to his heels, with huge gold spectacles and white hat, a cross between a bowler and a tall hat cut down. Infinite variety! But the smock-frock—one longs to see it—is, alas! absent. Nevertheless, the endless and picturesque modification which the English costume, prosaic and ugly though one is apt to consider it, seems capable of at a Berkshire sheep-fair is surprising.

One old shepherd, who carries the invariable heavy walking-stick that appears to have taken the place of the shepherd's crook, wears a dark-blue smocked coat and a slouch hat. His face bears the calm and beautiful expression that is seen sometimes upon the faces of those old shepherds whose whole life has been spent with Nature, alone, in the fields or upon the Downs, with no companionship but that of their sheep and their dogs, when they would wile away the time of their solitude sometimes in carving wonderful designs upon walking-sticks. Now and then in an old house you may see one of these sticks; and an interesting piece of workmanship it is. This man's whole bearing is a combination of quiet dignity and childlike simplicity. When a "snapshot" photograph was taken of him and his great shaggy bob-tailed dog, he came up immediately afterwards expecting to see his likeness; his face clouded over with disappointment when he

was told that a great deal had yet to be done before the picture came into existence. Alas! that picture never did come into existence; one of the manifold misfortunes attending the fate of these precarious things overtook it, and—the opportunity is gone for ever.

That fine old man;—one could imagine his desiring to have carried out at his death the almost obsolete custom of placing a lock of the sheep's wool in the shepherd's coffin, in order that at the Judgment Day his calling might be known, and thus a reason given for his irregular attendance at church during his lifetime. The simple pathos of the ancient custom might well attach itself to this particular old shepherd.

Presently an unusually loud bleating of sheep and barking of dogs is heard. What can be happening? The fair is nearly over, and a flock of sheep is being driven, or rather is refusing to be driven, away. Sheep are said to have an instinctive and curious objection to going downhill upon an unknown road. These particular animals are exhibiting this trait to an amazing extent. A rope has been fastened round the neck of one of them and the victim is thus being dragged along, in the hope that, sheep-like, the others will follow. Nothing of the kind. The hope is altogether a vain one, their conduct is most unsheep-like. They rush and bound about in every direction, they even leap the hurdles, and get mixed up with the others About twenty dogs are now yapping at their heels, evidently thinking it all fine fun. One dog seizes a

shepherd by the leg, doubtless in his excitement mistaking him for a sheep. The noise is deafening, the dust is sent flying in smothering clouds. Headlong rush the sheep—in every direction but the one in which they are intended to go, scattering the men, who are powerless to stem the torrent of their mad flight. In the end the sheep get their own way, and go down another road, leading, however, by a circuitous route to the one by which they were originally intended to go. The incident seems to demonstrate very forcibly the powerlessness of man, unarmed, to contend against any animal that chooses to assert its strength.

Yet the sheep has, in all ages, both in the East and West, been considered as a symbol of weakness, of innocence, even of foolishness. Who knows?—perhaps his character is changing in this twentieth century. Perhaps he, too, has moved with the times, acquired more individuality and independence, more cunning perhaps. This particular flock of sheep might well have been possessed in the same manner as we are told was a certain herd of swine in old days. Though that is impossible and past belief, for sheep have always been considered proof against any powers of darkness whatsoever. Even up to a comparatively recent date, in some parts of England, when a restless spirit "walked" for any reason, the custom was to lay it in the sheep-folds, because sheep are such innocent creatures. Thirteen parsons would stand round and read the Bible, six forwards and six backwards; after this the unquiet spirit was

at peace! Dying persons were wrapped in sheepskins sometimes. A story was told me by an old Berkshire rustic, of a farmer living upon the Downs, who, when he was in rude health, used to declare that there was "no heaven, nor hell, nor devil, but only your conscience make them." When he was dying, however, he changed his mind, and kept on crying out that his room was full of devils. This went on for two days and two nights; it was only when some kind friends had fetched a sheepskin and had wrapped him in it that he was able to die comfortably. As it was necessary that the skin should be that of a freshly killed animal—not cured, of course—it strikes one that possibly the remedy was worse than the disease.

A quaint old rhyme, which doubtless aptly described East Ilsley in bygone times, as to some points, is probably not an inappropriate description even now—

> "Far-famed for wool, though not for spinners,
> For sportsmen, doctors, publicans and sinners."

Publicans, at any rate, East Ilsley has never lacked.

At Keat's Gore, near Ilsley, a birth took place which, though only that of an animal, proved of greater interest later to a larger number of people than the birth, probably, of any single human being that has occurred in the neighbourhood. For at Keat's Gore, the celebrated race-horse "Eclipse" was foaled, and afterwards trained. Eventually he went to Canons, near Edgware, which his owner had bought

from the Duke of Chandos. In old age the horse was taken from Epsom to Canons upon a specially constructed carriage; he ended his days there; his bones rest in the beautiful park.

A romantic story, by the way, told of the former owner of Canons, Lord Chandos, afterwards the Duke of Chandos, has a connection with Berkshire, for the heroine of it was a Newbury woman. One day when driving through Marlborough and halting at the Castle Inn he heard a woman's screams proceeding from the yard. He went to see what was the matter, and found a beautiful girl at the mercy of the brutality of an ostler who was beating her cruelly. The Duke chivalrously interfered, and tried to stop it. But the ostler declared that the young woman was his wife, therefore he had a right to beat her. However, to appease the wrath of the Duke, and satisfy his demands for mercy, he was quite willing to make a compromise—he would sell his wife for £20. The Duke paid the money down, took the young woman away, and eventually married her. The quaint story is recorded in a book that is preserved in the British Museum, and bound—strange idea—whether prompted by sentiment or economy one is at a loss to say, in some crimson velvet that remained over from the coffin of the Duchess.

CHAPTER III

TWO PICTURESQUE VILLAGES

PERHAPS you may be going on towards East Hagbourne, another of these fascinating villages of the Downs, lying close to Didcot, at no great distance from Wallingford.

This is a fruit country, full of cherry and apple orchards—another variety and vagary of this county of Berkshire, so full of moods and surprises. On a spring evening you might almost fancy this bit of the country to be embosomed in a snowdrift that has been touched to rose-colour by the setting sun. Now, in September the cherries have been gathered, but the apples still hang heavily from the boughs. Women are standing upon ladders in the sunshine gathering the ruddy fruit into flat baskets for the markets. The women in these villages upon the Downs still wear sunbonnets, and still do out-of-door work. No doubt they are all the healthier and the happier for their work in the open.

Soon, quite suddenly where two roads meet, you come upon an unexpected relic. High up upon the

HAGBOURNE

bank by the side of the road, almost in the hedge, lies all that is left of a stone cross, part of a worn base, and about three feet of broken shaft. What is the history of that old deserted cross? There is something weird about it, lying there, solitary, and forsaken; you linger for a moment and pass on wondering.

Curious features of this part of the country are the mud walls. They have a layer of wattles at the top, over these a coping of thatch. Grey, and broken, and in every shape of dilapidation they surround the orchards and cottages, cropping up here and there along the lanes. In some places perhaps the coping has been mended; you see every now and then a bit of new straw that has been patched in. However, this is seldom. In nearly every case where the straw has fallen to ruin, so it remains, as though the country people felt instinctively that these walls are a remnant of a bygone civilisation, and have not got the heart, nor perhaps the money, to repair them. There is something pathetic about it. They are just left to decay, until in time they will disappear altogether. Some day they may be replaced by brick or stone erections, more durable, certainly less picturesque.

At Coscote, just outside Hagbourne, there is a quaint old house with a gabled and tiled roof, and a quantity of carving upon the woodwork of its eaves and windows. The story goes that it belonged originally to a pair of sisters, who quarrelled, and divided the house into two! The number of these quarrelsome

sisters, if tradition tells truly, scattered about the country is appalling! The disagreeing relations seem never to have been brothers, for the reason obviously, that the lot of brothers is seldom to live together in the same way. History does not say whether after their separation these sisters grew more amicable; if not, they were still in uncomfortably close quarters, for their two front doors almost touched each other. The division between the houses has now been removed. The house may originally have been a farm; there are many large thatched barns surrounding it.

West Hagbourne had formerly a chapel of ease for East Hagbourne, and belonged to the family of Windsor from the time of the Conqueror to that of Henry VI. There is no church in the former place now, only a few cottages. But the cottages are worth exploring, both inside and out. Some of them are composed of posts and plaster, eked out perhaps with planks. They are thatched, and the fact of having all the windows at the back, away from the road, gives them a gaunt and forsaken appearance, which in some cases is not belied if you peep inside. Even the luxury and beauty of bright flowers in the gardens appears sometimes to be out of the question. It seems, as I said before with regard to the thatched walls, as though the inhabitants had no heart for anything, except perhaps just the daily struggle of keeping body and soul together. Wages are no doubt low and families large. But go on a little farther; you will see the cottages which I mentioned just now as well

worth exploring. They are more prosperous-looking, the woodwork of the quaint windows and gables is adorned with carving, the walls ornamented with zig-zag carving. One house there is especially that will repay you for more than a cursory glance, should the occupants allow you to go inside. You will find that the rooms are low and raftered; rough rubble stones bulge from the walls, while the doors, probably of oak, are quite black. Strangely out of keeping with the poor interiors, they are furnished with iron handles and wonderful locks. There must have been some artistic feeling after beauty in these remote places long ago, and an antiquary in search of a summer holiday to be combined with some interesting research might do worse than go to West Hagbourne.

So on to East Hagbourne—another astonishment, another surprise. The beauty of this sequestered village as you come down into it is almost bewildering. In the centre of it stands a fine old cross, very well preserved, whose graceful, slender shaft rises from a base of five steps six or seven feet in height. Out of the houses clustering round you might almost expect to see folk in ancient costume issue forth, move up and down the little street, and form themselves into picturesque groups, because it is more like a village on the stage than anything else. The wealth of colour is truly magnificent. Red tiles, black wood, brown thatch, and creamy plaster all mix in a delicious medley, with here and there a brilliant splash of Virginian creeper. Think of it! Don't you want to

go there at once? You had better do so if you wish to see it looking as I have described it. For the Goth and the Vandal and the Philistine, and all the rest of them have begun their work. Soon, too soon, alas! East Hagbourne as I know it may be numbered with the things that are gone for ever.

One understands and envies the artist who has taken up his abode in one of these delightful cottages. The plaster entrance passage he has decorated with charming frescoes; you may get a peep at them through the open door as you pass. Just a little farther on, and well within the picture, stands the church. Near it is the Manor Farm and the moat in which rises the stream or "bourne" which gives its name to East Hagbourne. In the time of Alfred it was called "Hacca's Brook," after a man of that name.

In Domesday Hagbourne was called Hachebourne. It was given by Henry I. to the monastery of Cirencester. In the grant of the Manor to Sir Francis Knollys after the Reformation, mention is made of a park, so it is considered probable that the Abbot had an occasional residence there.

More than an ordinary atmosphere of bygone days seems to hang round the church and its surroundings. There are some interesting memorial tablets, and the building possesses a wooden roof, with some good carving and a carved wooden pulpit bearing the date 1638. There are also some remains of old stained glass. Close by are the great thatched barns of the Manor Farm, and orchards which in spring are a sight

worth going to see. Verily Hagbourne lies in a very vale of peace. Yet, long ago the little village saw stirring times. Wars and rumours of wars reached it, for during the Civil War of 1641 the Parliamentarian Army, under the Earl of Essex, was quartered there, and Cavalier and Roundhead went clattering down the street.

While one is absorbing the atmosphere of this picturesque old village, and wandering about the little streets of Hagbourne, it seems almost shocking and certainly artistically wrong to think of such a prosaic and modern convenience as the Great Western Railway. Nevertheless, there it is, close by, and the train for Didcot, if you are so minded, will take you to the old town of Abingdon, unless, far better, if you want to see the country, you mount your bicycle and go by the road.

Upon the site where the Market Place, built in Queen Anne's time, now stands, was formerly a market cross, the central gathering place for business and gossip. Here it was that Richard Corbet, Dean of Christchurch, and afterwards Bishop of Norwich, made himself the hero of an amusing escapade. The good bishop, who was evidently a genial spirit, was one market-day with some of his companions at the "taverne" by the "crosse" when he overheard the complaints of a ballad singer, that he had no custom, and could not get rid of his ballads. Whereupon the jolly doctor, gauging the reason perhaps of the man's want of success, rose to the occasion, doffed his

gown, put on the ballad singer's leathern jacket, and said he would try his luck in the street. And being what the unfortunate ballad singer did not happen to be, a very handsome man, and at the same time possessing what maybe the ballad singer also lacked, a fine full voice, the bishop had no difficulty in attracting a large audience, and in vending plenty of the songs. The proceeds of the joke one feels sure were handed afterwards to his less-favoured brother, and doubtless when they repaired presently to the "taverne" the company agreed unanimously that this Church dignitary had mistaken his vocation.

There are sad associations connected with old Abingdon fair; it was there that all the servants of the unfortunate Lady Dudley were sent, upon the day her death took place at Cumnor Hall. The mystery shrouding her death will never be satisfactorily cleared away. Much was judged, as the landlord at the inn at Abingdon declared, by the fact that upon the morning of her death she rose very early, and commanded all her servants to go to the fair, and would suffer none to tarry at home. Even Mrs. Odvigsell, a lady who was staying at Cumnor and who remonstrated, so it is said, at the suggestion that she should also go to Abingdon, declaring that the following day was a better one for gentlewomen, was also persuaded eventually to follow the rest.

The jury gave a verdict of accidental death, but as their domestic life together latterly had not been a happy one, and Lord Dudley was suspected of wishing

to marry Queen Elizabeth, he was not held by public opinion to be altogether guiltless of his wife's death. These suspicions held ground especially upon the Continent among the Queen's enemies in France. Whether her death was due to accident or whether to evil intentions will never now be known, but be this as it may, Lady Dudley's ghost was supposed to haunt Cumnor Hall. Even the efforts of nine parsons to lay the unquiet spirit in an adjoining pond were not successful; the water in the pond was said never to have been frozen over again, and still the inhabitants of the place complained of being aroused at dead of night by unearthly and terrific noises.

The dire and terrible sign said to have appeared in the heavens above Abingdon rather more than a century and a half later had nothing to do with the death of Lady Dudley. At that time it had been reported that several premonitions and apparitions had been seen in and about the City of London, the people had been advised by the Church to lay them to heart and repent. The persons who saw the sight near Abingdon are described as having been all in perfect health and sound memory. They were John Nibb, a very sober fellow, a carrier of Cicester, and his company of five persons; they were on the road about two miles eastwards of the little Berkshire town, on their way to London. The sun had hardly risen a quarter of an hour, but towards the south part of the horizon appeared the perfect similitude of a tall man in a blackish habit; the man disappeared, and the sky

appeared in the form of water or sea, and fishes of divers shapes were perfectly discerned to leap in and out of the water. There seemed to be a perfect calm at sea, then suddenly the sea was disturbed as if with wind, and immediately appeared about one hundred ships of several bignesses and several fashion of building, out of which fleet was discerned some small ships that continually sailed to and from the fleet, as if they had been sent out to advise ships, or had come in to give account of their condition. This continued for about a quarter of an hour, and then disappeared. It was all apparently very terrible; the story of it spread as rapidly as stories could spread in those days. One can imagine the objects of interest that John Nibb and his five companions were whenever and wherever they appeared; how they were surrounded and plied with questions; every one wanting to hear the tale, every one putting his or her own interpretation upon the event. It was generally supposed to point to the necessity for prayers, and supplications that "God would bless our gracious King, and once more restore this nation to a perfect unity and concert." The year 1679, in which the Abingdon apparition appeared, was the one following the Titus Oates conspiracy; it also saw the committal to the Tower of the Earl of Danby in connection with the secret treaty made with Louis promising for £300,000 a year to dissolve Parliament should it prove troublesome and not to help the Dutch.

The little town of Abingdon, in common with many

other of the Berkshire towns and villages, was acquainted with troublous times during the Civil Wars. It formed one of the ring of fortified places while King Charles's headquarters were at Oxford in 1642. It was held by the Royalists as an advanced post, and here they quartered the main body of the horse, when the King with the whole of the Royal Family passed through in April, 1644. Later, on the approach of Essex and Waller, Abingdon was abandoned by the Royalists, who made several fruitless attempts to recapture it. Prince Rupert himself made a last desperate effort, but though he gained possession of the Abbey, the town was finally given over to the Parliamentarians.

CHAPTER IV

NEWBURY

THE little town of Newbury wakes up once a week, as is the way of little country towns, upon the market-day. Then, towards the close of the afternoon upon every road leading out of it, you will meet lines of carts; farmers and their wives and daughters jogging home, returning from buying and selling, and gossiping with their neighbours; carriers' vans loaded with passengers—overloaded, alas! too often—flocks and herds of tired sheep and cattle wending their ways wearily and sadly to their new destinations or returning unsold to their owners. This spasmodic weekly movement being over, the little town for another seven days appears to doze again.

But Newbury has not always been so sleepy—far from it, indeed. At one time in its history it was a very busy, bustling place, full of life and industry, having a great sense of its own importance; not without reason, for other people were also fully aware of its importance. And the reason of the importance of Newbury was a good one—its own industry. It was a great seat of the

cloth trade, as also was Reading. Indeed to Reading and its rich clothier, Thomas Cole, is owed the useful establishment of the standard yard measure. This Thomas Cole was a man of vast wealth, employing as many as one hundred and forty menial servants in his house besides three hundred poor people whom he set to work. One day the enormous procession of his wains filled with cloth was making its way along the Bath road to London, blocking the whole road, and effectually stopping King Henry I., who was making a progress in the opposite direction. However, in spite of the annoyance caused by the delay, the King, who approved of the industry of his subjects and wished to encourage it, gratified Thomas Cole, and all his possession, with the set measure of a yard, the King making his own arm the standard thereof, wherefore drapery was reduced in the meting thereof to a greater certainty.

In the principal street of this little town of Newbury there still stands a portion of a fifteenth-century brick-and-timber building. This is all that is remaining of that wonderful house belonging to the famous clothier Jack of Newbury, of which Fuller remarks "that it may well now make sixteen clothiers' houses whose wealth would amount to six hundred of his estates." This famous Jack of Newbury rose from the position of an apprentice to be the greatest of the cloth merchants of the town, and the most flourishing. So flourishing was he indeed that the jealousy he created amongst his fellows caused them to prophesy

his certain downfall. He was, they declared somewhat poetically, "like the stork in the Springtime, who thinks the highest cedar too low to build his nest in, and ere the year be half done may be glad to have a bed in a bush."

But Jack of Newbury lived long enough to prove all his fellow-townsmen wrong. By and by he equipped and made ready one hundred men to protect the Queen against the invading Scottish army, and was leading them to battle, when the news of the victory of Flodden Field arrived, and he returned to Newbury. King Henry VIII. and Cardinal Wolsey met him and went with Queen Catherine to Jack's house. Here the clothier entertained his sovereign with great honour, the floor of the banqueting-hall, according to the story, being covered with cloth instead of rushes, choice pieces of the finest wool of azure colour valued at £100 a piece. Jack does not appear to have been at all ambitious of fame, for he refused the King's offer of making him a knight, leaving honours of this description to be conferred upon his descendants at Bucklebury, and the family of which he was the founder. The honour of a royal visitor also came to Jack's son. Queen Elizabeth, in one of her progresses, stayed with John Winchcombe, who had come to be well known, and a man of considerable property. The good people of Newbury retained such delightful memories of this visit of the Virgin Queen, that they instituted the custom, which was discontinued only in 1739, of ringing the bells of the parish church upon her accession day, September 17th.

Jack's ambitions seem to have been rather in the interests of his trade. When it had declined because the foreign merchants were forbidden to come to England, and the English merchants were forbidden to have dealings with France and the Low Countries, Jack travelled to London—a journey of some consideration in those days—and made a petition. This he gained, in spite of the opposition of Cardinal Wolsey; after that, Newbury became the most flourishing seat of the cloth trade.

In Newbury parish church there is a brass bearing the following inscription: "Off yo charitie pray for the soule of John Smalwode als Winchcom and Alys his wife. John dyed the XV. day of February Mdccccxix. He was the most considrable clothier without fancy or fiction England ever beheld." This tablet was probably fixed originally to a stone erected in obedience to Jack's will, "a stone to be layde upon us boothe."

Another evidence of the wealth and importance of the Newbury clothiers is found in Shaw House, which is just outside the town. This beautiful old house was built by Thomas Dolman, another great cloth merchant, when he retired from business. The agitation that this event caused at the time is embodied in a quaint old rhyme:—

> "Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable sinners,
> Thomas Dolman has built a new house,
> And has turned away all his spinners."

Shaw House was in the possession of the Dolmans during the Civil Wars, and was garrisoned for King Charles against a siege. For some years the annual Horse Show has been held in its grounds.

In February, 1539, John Winchcombe wrote to Sir Thomas Cromwell, Secretary of State, with reference to an order he had received for 1,000 pieces of kerseys before Easter. "The time is very short," but he trusted to "make shift to have 500 pieces ready against Easter." He would speak about the price when he went up to London, which he hoped to do shortly. But by the time of Charles I. the Newbury cloth trade had quite declined. In a note concerning the regulation of corn, December 28, 1630, it is mentioned that "the poor of Newbury have their dependancy on the clothiers, who forbear to set them to work having no vent for their cloth. They are at present in a miserable condition, so that the writers fear what the event may be." Problems of labour and trade and employment are not new, nor confined to these later days.

In a further note, in 1632, the reason for the decay of the trade is given. The cloth was badly made, and an excellent kind of material called Spanish cloth was superseding it. By which we may gather that already, in the early part of the seventeenth century, we were allowing foreign goods to displace our own manufactures. The only remaining sign visible at present of the once prosperous cloth trade at Newbury is the picturesque little old timber-and-plaster Cloth Hall, standing in the

middle of the town, which has lately been restored and converted into a museum and picture gallery.

Newbury had at the time of the Reformation a great feeling for, and sympathy with, the old religion, and the Winchcombes always seem to have been connected with any public movement in the town. Miles Coverdale appears to have been staying in Newbury in 1539, and from there, on March 5th, he wrote a letter to Sir Thomas Cromwell. "The stationers of London for their lucre and gains are not ashamed to sell still such primers as corrupt the King's subjects. Many such have been brought me, and a great sort of other most ungracious Popish books have I taken within Newbury. With your authority I will collect many more. Please send answer by the young Mr. Winchcombe whether I shall burn these Popish books at the Market Cross or not." The translator of the Bible appears to have used the young clothier more than once as his messenger. In another epistle, dated February 6, 1539, Miles Coverdale again writes to Cromwell from Newbury, saying that a great number of priests have incurred *præmunire* for continuing practices against the King's laws. This *præmunire* signified "cause to be warned," and was the weapon used to bring about the fall of Cardinal Wolsey. It was established in 1353, and was aimed at the power of the Papal courts, and inflicted severe punishment on those who "sued in foreign courts for matters cognisable to the King." "A great part of the Matins in Newbury Church on a certain feast day," the writer of this letter continues,

"were plainly a maintenance of the Bishop of Rome's usurped power"; and that he had not mentioned this even to the bearer of the letter, Mr. Winchcombe, "notwithstanding his true heart to the King."

It is difficult, as one walks about the quiet little town of Newbury, to realise all its former importance, and the part it has played in the history of the country; that in the reign of Edward I. it returned two members to Parliament, and in the reign of Edward III. three. Old towns decrease and wane with the lapse of years, new ones—Reading, for instance—rise up and grow in wealth and prosperity.

Other royal visits have been paid to Newbury besides those of Henry VIII. and Queen Elizabeth. James I. and his Queen certainly travelled through the town, for in a letter to her uncle, the Earl of Shrewsbury, the unfortunate Lady Arabella Stuart alludes to the fact in a quaint manner with remarks that were complimentary to the Queen only at the expense of the ladies of the court. "If ever thear wear such a virtue as courtesy at the court, marvell what is becom of it, for I protest I see little or none of it but in the Queene, who ever since her coming to Newbury hathe spoken to the people as she passeth, and receiveth the prayers and thankes and thankfull countenance, barefaced" (by which is meant unmasked), "to the great contentment of natif and forreign people."

Queen Anne was also at Newbury in 1703, and was entertained at Shaw House; George III. also visited the town several times. Though it may be a small

and unimportant place, it has not been forgotten by its sovereigns.

Newbury must ever be associated with the time of the Civil War, and the loss in battle of several distinguished men, the chief of them being Lucius Cary Viscount Falkland. And Newbury has remembered it —a stone column bears witness to this fact. Falkland had put himself in the first rank of the army which was advancing against the Parliamentarians, who had lined the hedges on both sides with musqueteers. He was shot with a musket in the lower part of his body, and falling immediately from his horse his corpse was not found until the morning. "I am weary of the times and foresee much misery to my country," he had said upon the morning of the battle, "but believe I shall be out of it ere night." The night before he had passed at Newbury, at the house of a highly respectable tradesman of the name of Head, in the Market Place. Falkland was so firmly convinced that an engagement was inevitable that day, and that he would be slain in it, that he wished to receive the sacrament. Very early in the morning of the battle it was administered to him by the clergyman of Newbury, Mr. Head and the whole of his family being present. The grief of that family when the news of his death was brought was sincere and deep; during even the short time of his stay Lord Falkland had won their affection and respect.

It was long before the disastrous effects of the Civil War ceased to be felt at Newbury. The spirit of

pillage and plunder had seized upon the people; the soldiers still remained about the town, and had become in many cases marauders. The clothiers especially suffered, for their goods were frequently seized, and stolen by highwaymen on the Bath road, when on their way to London, or the packages being suspected of containing ammunition were pulled off the packhorses, opened, and either appropriated or destroyed by the soldiers. Serious loss, amounting sometimes to several hundreds of pounds, was thus sustained. Even the town itself was not safe, and the inhabitants instituted the best means they could devise for the protection of themselves. A watchman walked the streets at night ringing a bell, and shouting in a distinct and audible voice the condition of the weather and the time and hour of the night. This promenading of the streets was supposed to act as a check upon evilly disposed persons. It frightened them away no doubt; a policeman with a bell strikes one as somewhat of an anomaly. It reminds one of the old story of the mice who could not solve the problem as to who was to bell the cat. Only in this case there was no problem to solve, for the enemy belled himself. This old custom of the watchman long contined as a survival. Many of the older people can still remember the grim sensation of being awakened at the dead of night by the voice of the night watchman, calling monotonously outside the house. There may possibly have been a certain sense of protection in the sound—a satisfaction, when the weather was cold and frosty, or wet and

blowing, at being warmly tucked up in bed, able to turn round and go comfortably to sleep again. All the same there must have been a weirdness about the watchman's cry: a suggestion even of another cry at midnight long before, a cry that spelt terror to so many hearts—"Bring out your dead." We welcome all the quiet we can get at night, all the respite that is possible from the noise of the motors and the roar of the traffic that has oppressed us during the day. When we go to bed we desire to be absolutely undisturbed. So, more prosaic though he may be, less picturesque he certainly is, the modern policeman with his dark lantern and his indiarubber shoes, is preferable to the old watchman with his lantern and his heavy boots and his hoarse cry.

The remark of John Wesley, after preaching in the parish church on a Sunday in February in the year 1740, though favourable to the ladies of Newbury, can hardly be said to speak well for those of his other congregations. The subject of his sermon had been the text, "I will heal their backslidings, I will love them freely," and he felt evident surprise at the fact that though the church was full of chiefly genteel, well-dressed people, they behaved as though they knew that God was there. Probably the neglect of church-going, then prevalent in London, had not penetrated to Newbury, or, possibly the little Berkshire town, long before, in the time of its prosperity, so warm in its support of the Catholic religion, was now equally roused to interest by the enthusiasm of the great Methodist.

Newbury was also strong in its support of the great actors and actresses. In the Georgian period the old theatre at Speenhamland, as one part of the town is called, welcomed many of them within its doors. The Roman road from London to Bath runs right through Newbury, which is almost equi-distant from the two towns. So, in the old coaching days there were grand doings there; though the roads were so bad that the coaches containing the celebrities frequently had to be dug out of the mud or snow. It seems strange to think of all the famous theatrical people who performed there, and the constant stream of fashionable life that flowed through the little market town. Upon the stage at Speenhamland appeared Mrs. Kemble, that "little woman but great actress." There also played Mrs. Jordan, the great queen of comedy, who at the beginning of her career, when questioned by a manager as to what parts she could play, replied laconically, "all." Mrs. Jordan—the favourite of a Prince, who was admired and praised by all the great men of her day; of whom Sir Joshua Reynolds remarked that she ran upon the stage as a playground, and laughed from sincere wildness of delight. John Philip Kemble, who was said during his stay at Lausanne to be jealous even of the homage paid to Mont Blanc, also honoured Newbury with a visit. The inhabitants evidently appreciated him; there was no such untoward incident as had occurred at York, when the actor was interrupted by the loud talking of a fashionable young lady. Rightly, as it would appear to us, Kemble stopped the

performance, till such time as the damsel should see fit to be quiet. It is a curious illustration of the manners of the time that, although the audience approved of Kemble's course of action, the friends of the young lady demanded an apology; this, however, was refused by the actor. Selfishness and bad behaviour were not only exhibited in church: Wesley's experiences amongst his fashionable congregations were not unique.

Last, but not least, amongst the celebrities who played in the little Newbury theatre was Edmund Kean, of whom no less a person than Byron wrote: "By Jove, he is a soul,—Life—nature, truth, without exaggeration or diminution."

Memories of peace and memories of war are both mixed up with Donnington Castle, the fortress described by an ancient historian as "a small but very neat castle, situated on the browe of a woody hill, having a fine prospect, and windows on all sides very lightsome." Donnington Castle has suffered the changes and chances of time and war; it is now a ruin, but long ago, if tradition tells truly, it afforded rest and retirement to a poet. Chaucer is said to have gone there in his later years, when, tired of London and the glamour of the Court, a quiet life in a beautiful country appealed to him. One would fain believe the legend that many of his poems were written there; this, alas! is impossible, for the reputed residence of the poet was only for a period of three years at the end of his life. Memories of war are associated with Donnington

Castle, of a brave resistance against fearful odds by Colonel Boys, who to the threat of the Parliamentarians that if the fortress did not surrender he would not leave one stone upon another, made answer, that he was not bound to repair it, but by God's help he would keep the ground afterwards. Even after three of the towers and a part of the wall had been destroyed, the little garrison still held out manfully, until it was relieved by the King, who knighted his brave general at Newbury.

CHAPTER V

IN THE COUNTRY OF KING ALFRED THE GREAT

THE suggestion was once made to the late Professor Huxley that he should join a society having for its object the suppression of a railway through the Lake District. The Professor would have none of it, he was in favour of the railway; if it had not been, he said, for the little line of rails running along Lake Derwentwater he could not have made Keswick his headquarters, and so would have missed his day's delight. "I would make," he declared, "beautiful scenery accessible to all the world if I could."

This is just what the little railway from Newbury to Lambourne is helping to bring about; it has done no harm, the country is as yet unspoilt, without question it is a benefit. Should they wish to betake themselves to fresh woods and pastures new, the owners of motors and the riders of bicycles, it is true, can afford to a certain extent to be independent of railways, light or otherwise. But every one does not yet possess a motor—earnestly and devoutly be it

hoped that every one never will!—nor can the majority of people ride long distances upon bicycles. So the little railway, being of use to the country people by connecting them with the town of Newbury, is of great advantage to others. The country traversed by it has a special interest. It may well be called King Alfred's country; upon the Downs all around some of the most decisive battles of the good and great King were fought. The villages nestling in the valley have many associations with Saxon times and the terrible invasion of the Danes.

At Boxford, the first station upon the little railway, the thatched cottages, a distinctive feature of the Lambourne valley villages, begin. One gets out of the little train with the feeling of having got right into the heart and depth of the country, hundreds of miles away from any civilisation except of the most primitive kind. After all Boxford is only fifty-nine miles from London; nevertheless it seems to be a veritable Sleepy Hollow. Groups of thatched cottages nestle cosily round the church whose squat, ivy-grown red tower rises but little above them. On the wall in the chancel still hangs a faded old Royal Arms, while it still appears necessary to remind the inhabitants of Boxford that a man may not marry his grandmother. Upon the gallery at the west end of the church are painted details in large letters of village charities dating from the year 1600. Some of the inscriptions and epitaphs upon the tombstones are curious. The following to the memory of the Rawlins family

LAMBOURNE CHURCH.

strikes one as strangely reminiscent of the title of a certain French book, viz., "Papa, Maman et Bébé."

He died 1719, aged 70
She died 1728, aged 68
Sarah died 1747, aged 59.
Near this place lie the bodies of John Rawlins Gent, and Hannah his wife, with his daughters Ann and Sarah.

The roads in the Lambourne valley cannot be commended for bicycling; after a dry season they are rough and dusty, covered with quantities of loose stones and rubble, perilous and risky indeed to tyres, promising a goodly crop of punctures. But there is the railway hard by, running the whole length of the Lambourne valley, always ready to supply the place of the bicycle; after all one need not be too much distressed about the state of the roads.

The river Lambourne is almost choked in some places by masses of the yellow monkey flower (*Mimulus Langsdorfer*), an American plant that has now become naturalised; mixed in with it and growing in luxuriance upon the shallow banks is the wild thyme, with its scented mauve flowers. Little wooden bridges span the water all through the villages; here and there a stronger one of red brick or stone. Many and many a happy hour may the fisherman spend upon the banks of the Lambourne. Should he be fortunate enough to find himself in the valley in June, he will probably return home with a heart at peace with the world and a full basket, for trout are numerous in the

little river, and leafy June is the best month of all for the sport. A few days' fishing, in the valley during the months of July, August, or September, is an amusement by no means to be despised by those who appreciate the sport.

High up above the villages upon either side lie the Berkshire Downs, sunny and bright and pleasant in summer and autumn; bleak and dreary enough in winter when the wind sweeps over them, and the snow hides all traces of the tracks and footpaths, the only signs of human life.

Now and then a wagon will appear upon the skyline, and move slowly along the ridge, or a group of gleaners working in the harvest-fields. All the women wear the old-fashioned sunbonnets. Now and then, a year or two ago, a smock-frock might actually have been seen, few and far between indeed, perhaps only two or three remaining in the whole of the valley. Even the oldest men have given them up; "they have grown too proud," an old woman said to me rather sadly one day. Her husband had given up wearing his before he died, but she "did like to see him in it when it was washed and clean." Being of a frugal mind, and apparently not sharing the pride with which she accredited her husband, she had cut it up and made it into a "wropper" for herself, and "a beautiful wropper it had made."

Strange, when one thinks of it, this discontinuance of the smock-frock. Has the need for it departed, with the decrease of human agricultural labour, and the

increase of machinery, or is the reason for its disuse to be found simply in a change of fashion? Is it really, as the old woman in the Lambourne valley said, that the men have grown too proud to wear them, or is it not quite possible that the fault lay partly with the women, who no longer possessed the patience required for making them. The beautiful needlework which went to the fashioning of these old country garments needed plenty of that admirable virtue; the smock-frock was not made in a day. Whatever the reason for its departure, it has gone; and when one visits the picturesque villages that now know it no more, one cannot help regretting its absence. For it would still well fit into the picture.

But here, while bemoaning its loss, I must record a delightful instance of its still being worn in one little town in the north of Berkshire. There, if you happen to be fortunate, you may catch a glimpse of an old dairyman said to be in affluent circumstances, looking as if he had stepped straight out of a picture of Morland's—smock-frock, low felt hat, yoke upon his shoulders with shining milk buckets hanging from it, all complete. Ellen Terry once, when driving through this quaint little town, saw his picturesque figure, and her artistic eye was at once delighted. Stopping the carriage, she eagerly asked where the smocks could be bought, and —the story goes—supplied herself with two or three. From somewhere, I presume they must still be obtainable, for the old dairyman's cannot last for ever, but one has an uncomfortable suspicion that now they

may be machine-made. After all, different times, different manners; other changes have taken place also. The same old woman who regretted the smock, and whose age was lost in the mist of years, remembered the village stocks. This discontinuance she did not regret. She had often seen them used, and an old man in the village told a similar story. This old fellow appeared to have considered himself of some importance in the place, for he had often mounted guard over the unfortunate victims of these instruments of torture. The offenders, according to their former guardian, had to sit upon the ground, not a pleasant position certainly, in damp or wet weather. Visions of all sorts of future ills, that those prisoners were laying up for themselves, passed rapidly before my mind's eye—colds and coughs, and bronchitis, and pneumonia, to say nothing of the seeds of a whole crop of greater ills. One's pity might just as well be reserved for some more serious object. Things were better than they appeared; the wind was tempered to the shorn lamb, even in the stocks. A moment later, with a knowing twinkle in his eye, seeing my distressful countenance, the old man went on to say, "We generally gave them something to sit upon; we couldn't be too hard." Alas! how soon all personal memory of these things will have passed away, and with it, I think, much of the interest and picturesqueness of these old-world villages.

It is in the villages themselves more than in any natural grandeur of scenery wherein the attraction of

the Lambourne valley lies. The little river runs murmuring through each one of them. The sound of its voice as it ripples gently over the stones is unconsciously as familiar as are the voices of their children to the cottagers. But for part of the year the voice of the river is silent. The Lambourne is what is known as an intermittent stream, and is fuller in the summer than in the winter. From the end of September to February, from its source to about East Garston, it is dry.

> "Little Lambesbourne . . .
> All summer long (while all thy sisters shrink)
> Then of thy tears, a million daily drink,"

sang sweetly Joshua Sylvester, the local poet, who for a long while was in the service of Sir William Essex at Lambourne; quaintly adding—

> "Let me, good Lord, among the great unkenn'd
> My rest of days in the calm country end,
> Be Hadley pond my sea, Lamb's bourne my Thames,
> Lamborne my London, Kennet's silver streams
> My fruitful Nile."

The Lambourne valley, as I said before, is above everything the country of the thatched cottage. In every village they cluster in groups. The thatch is very thick, of a beautiful colour, tempered and tinted by the rains and snows of years. Little windows peep out from under the eaves like half-closed, sleepy eyes.

The woodwork is all painted a bright green of a particular shade that has been used for generations, and turns to a delicious dusky blue as the chrome fades out of it. I have been told that there was a reason for the lavish use of this paint: that green was supposed to keep the devil from the house, but as I have never actually heard of the superstition from the country people themselves I cannot vouch personally for its existence. That there had been some belief of the kind seems probable; the idea is borne out by the fact of the popularity of this green paint for the woodwork of the houses in other countries. I know of a little village in the north of France where no other colour is used at all. Every shutter, every door in the place is of the same bright green. The instance of this village may be only one among many.

The Lambourne valley is the land also of old manor houses; beautiful houses whose glory has departed, most of which are now about half their original size. Their interiors have been altered and defaced until in some cases hardly anything but the shell remains; just perhaps one old panelled room, to show what once has been. But oh! the possibilities of those houses.

One there is at East Shefford, which village is thought to have been the "Siffard" or "Shifford," where King Alfred's Proverbs were given in 890. This old manor house was once the home of the ancient family of Fettiplace, perhaps the oldest and most important of all the Berkshire families. The Fettiplaces are said to have owned thirty-one manors

in the county, and to have married into every family that had any position there. Nothing now remains of their house at Shefford but one old panelled room; but such a room! One can easily imagine what a grand old place this moated house of the Fettiplaces must have been. It was built upon the site of a dwelling said to have belonged to Hugo, King of the Mercians. Tradition still points out traces of a dyke made by him.

Strange, is it not, and somewhat sad, to think of the glory that has departed from the little villages in the Lambourne valley? The tide of time has indeed washed the fulness of life away from them. Some day, doubtless, though you and I may not see it, the tide will flow in again; the old houses will be restored, and rich people will live there once more. This would have happened long ago had the country been nearer London. From the artist's point of view it is better that it all should remain as it is; but only perhaps from the point of view of the artist—and not from that of the social reformer. Low wages, and overcrowding, lead to a state of things that is neither ideal nor Utopian. The moral condition of the sweet villages on the Berkshire Downs, or in the Lambourne valley, is not beyond reproach. But alas! the artist and the social reformer do not always go hand in hand. And the villages as they appear are delightful, full of poetry and romance. I am wrong, I know, but when visions of red-brick houses with slate roofs rise up before my eyes, I feel that I would fain stay the wheels of the

van of progress, for awhile, in its course towards the Lambourne valley.

Wander down to the little church at Shefford. It stands in the fields, and is deserted and unused now except sometimes as a mortuary chapel. Here are interesting relics of departed life, and the grandeur that has ebbed away. The figures of a man in armour, and a woman, with the beautiful sculptured canopy of fifteenth-century work, are supposed to represent Sir Thomas Fettiplace and his wife Beatrice; there is another tomb also where John Fettiplace, Esq., who died in 1524, and Dorathye his wife are buried. In the cold, deserted chancel, secured by a locked chain, is a helmet, thought to have belonged to some member of this great family. There were signs in the church not only of the lord of the place, but also of the priest. An oak coffin was discovered containing the body of an ecclesiastic, holding in his hands a paten and chalice. These remains were supposed to be those of Prior Lawrence, who purchased the living early in the thirteenth century.

The little graveyard round the church is a thick tangle of grass and flowers, rising in some places nearly waist-high. A strange, sad, solitary air seems to hang about the place. Even upon a warm summer day it makes one shiver. One feels glad to get away; to leave the silence, which is almost stifling, the surroundings of the ruined, forsaken church, the atmosphere of bygone days, to get out into the road again.

SHEFFORD.

[*To face page* 56.

There are still more old dwellings to explore, signs of more old families. About a mile farther on, close to the church at Great Shefford, is another beautiful old manor house, with a panelled room that is called the King's room. Here Charles I. slept on November 14, 1644, the year of the second battle of Newbury. It is a wonderful old house; originally it must have been a very large one, judging by what one can see of the foundations. At one time it was in the Brydges family; afterwards it belonged to Viscount Montague. Now, much of it has been pulled down, and the rest altered. The great hall has been divided into small rooms, and the hiding-place and its exit, through an enormous chimney, walled up. Evidences there are of much feasting and merry-making in the old house long ago, and much junketing among the many retainers, for the huge brew-house still remains. The size of the vat, with its gigantic tap, fills the mind, in these temperate days, with wonder. This house was old even in the time of Charles I.; the church was almost, if not quite, attached to it. The family must have been so self-sufficient in its time—a little kingdom in its own way, loyal and loving to the King whom it sheltered in a time of danger. It makes one feel a little sad. "What have we that we have not received from the Lord?" is the motto upon a curious old paten belonging to the church, "The gifte of Thomas Harveye 1621." This must have been the period of the height of the power and magnificence of the family at the Manor. One wonders, could he have

foreseen all that was to come, whether Thomas Harveye would have wished a further inscription to be added, "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away."

From Shefford to East Garston is only a short distance. East Garston, beloved of painters, or at least of those who know of its existence, for it is a comparatively unexplored place at present is another village of thatched cottages; perhaps the prettiest of them all. Groups of little dwellings surrounded by gardens crammed full of hollyhocks, sweet peas, stocks, and dahlias, sweet old-fashioned flowers of every colour and description; the little river running past, crossed here and there by a rough wooden bridge, its banks covered thickly with thyme, and patches of the yellow monkey flower; a little ancient church with still another manor house standing near it—this is East Garston, or, as it is called by the villagers, Argeston. Argeston is its earlier Saxon name, the origin of which seems to be a little uncertain. It may have signified the "ton" of Esgar, ton or tun meaning the principal house, with a considerable number of inferior dwellings, and a quantity of land, the residence of the lord and his tenants.

Presently, still following the little river towards its source, we come to Eastbury. Here, again, are more groups of thatched cottages, their fronts interlaced with black wood; hollyhocks rear tall spikes against the walls, the gardens are a tangled mass of flowers—and once more, another old manor house, of red brick. It

belonged to the Barons Fitzwarine till the fifteenth century, when it passed through the female line into the Bouchier family. It is a most picturesque house, covered with ivy, with carved oaken eaves, and stone mullioned windows. Apparently, it is very much less than its original size, but altogether to be desired as a home. Here at last we find a panelled room to which all the others in the Lambourne valley must yield the palm, partly because it is in such perfect preservation, chiefly because of its beautiful carved mantelpiece. And to make this delightful old house still more attractive, the river, shaded by trees, bounds it like a moat, and you enter the garden over a dear little wooden bridge.

Another house there is at Eastbury of quite a different kind, interesting also in its own way. It is called Pigeon-House Farm from an enormous pigeon-house that belongs to it. The pigeon-house is of red brick, octagonal, with a bell-shaped roof; in it there are holes for over one thousand pigeons. Imagine the cooings and gurglings from the throats of a thousand pigeons. Pigeon-House Farm, with its full complement of birds, could not have been a very restful place. The sleep of its visitors certainly must have suffered; the owners, one presumes, were used to the noise. However, the thousand pigeons have departed, only the flutter of a few brown and grey and silver wings now fills the air with a pleasant sound.

Surrounding the Pigeon-House Farm is an old mud wall, kept in such good order that one is able to realise

what the old walls looked like originally, when they all had a thick pent-house coping of thatch, worked in with a pattern of osiers. This one is quite a work of art; an exhibition of the ingenuity of the thatcher, whose art in most places is becoming extinct, alas! Slates and tiles cover the houses, and corrugated iron the ricks and barns; perhaps there is only one old man left in a neighbourhood who knows how to thatch, and not only how to thatch, but to thatch well, for in this there is a vast difference. That one old man will travel all round the district to do the little work that is required of him. But in the Lambourne country the thatchers are still numerous, and find plenty of work to do.

Strange, is it not, that this seemingly peaceful valley of the Lambourne should so often have heard the noise of battle, and have been filled with soldiers and all the accompaniments of war. In the ninth century, especially, it was well acquainted with terrible scenes of bloodshed. The Danes, the "dark strangers," marched through that part of Berkshire conquering and killing as they went. What power indeed had a comparatively untrained force of men drawn from the field and the plough against the Vikings, with their terrible methods of warfare? They sailed up the Thames, and forced their way through Berkshire; their march was a march of devastation and ruin. Time after time the young King Alfred, then only twenty-one, and with him for a time his brother, Ethelbert, led an unavailing force up the Downs against Guthrum. The bravery of the

young Saxon king, and that of his young country, was futile for long against this army of old Sea Kings, trained in war and tactics. The Danes were routed at last, however, after continued efforts of the two young brothers, and forced to retreat to their camp at Reading. Then, though their defeat in England was only temporary, the little valley of the Lambourne again had peace.

Petty disturbances and internal struggles, indeed, the valley constantly knew. They were the natural consequence of the presence of the old manors, each of which was a little kingdom with its lord and dependants. Otherwise the inhabitants were left to pursue their peaceful avocations as shepherds and tillers of the ground, until the seventeenth century. Then once more the valley was disturbed, and Cavalier and Parliamentary soldiers became familiar objects, and the king was actually in their midst.

Again in the twentieth century there was fighting in the Lambourne valley. How changed the circumstances! How different in the equipment of its soldiers and the power of its terrible machinery was the army that invaded the peaceful country and scoured the Downs in these later days from the army that went out in defence of home and country in 871! But while the battles of the ninth century meant a grim and dreadful struggle for life and freedom, the battles of the twentieth century signified only a pleasurable excitement and a general holiday. All the inhabitants of the valley and of the country round trooped out to

see the soldiers belonging to the Red and Blue armies under Sir John French and General Bruce Hamilton. The little light railway had never carried so many passengers during the whole of its existence. Officers were rushing about in luxurious motor-cars; scouts upon bicycles. The great battle of Shefford was witnessed by hundreds of wondering spectators, who shivered with horror at the practical demonstration of what modern warfare might mean; nevertheless, felt so safe all the time that they almost forgot to be thankful that the firing was harmless. The noise of those terrible guns signified nothing more than the alarming of all the sheep upon the neighbouring Downs and the scaring of every bird within a tolerably large radius.

The stranger who chances to enter Lambourne, the little town at the terminus of the railway, for the first time from the station will certainly experience pangs of disappointment and apprehension. Lambourne is being rapidly built over. Hideous erections — you know the kind; they always make their appearance when the building fiend pounces down upon a place; red houses pointed with white stretching out in long lines—meet the eye. Really for the moment they cause one bitterly to regret the railway, the natural cause of the disfigurement. Presently, however, you feel better. As you go farther into the village—town, the little place can really hardly be called—thatched houses and nice old buildings meet your eye once more: houses that in spite of the condemnation of the

reformer, and even that of the sanitary inspector, you feel certain must be better to live in than those ugly jerry-built, and certainly draughty, little modern abodes. I do not deny that the interiors of the picturesque houses are capable of improvement; indeed, in many cases they cry out loudly for it. But the walls are thick, and the thatch is cosy and comfortable, they have an individuality—and ugh! those red and white boxes, they are all built exactly alike. You would hear your neighbours' quarrels through the walls.

Could anything be more solid and comfortable, and delightfully picturesque as well, than those old almshouses near the church at Lambourne? It would be quite worth while being an old person for the sake of living in them, though I am bound in confidence to say that even in old age I think it just possible after a time that the life might pall. But they are peaceful abodes. Over a gateway an inscription informs us that they were built by John Eastbury, A.D. 1507. Good old John Eastbury, one feels quite grateful to his memory, as one enters under the archway, even for the sight of such picturesque peacefulness. Grateful also one is to Henry Hippesley when he restored them for not having departed one atom from the original design. In the middle of the little courtyard stands a grand old wooden pump; there is—comforting thought—plenty of water for drinking and washing. The houses are built upon three sides of a square, surrounded by a narrow cloister. Here, under shelter, the old people can take a constitutional in comfort

when it rains, or pop in and out of each other's houses for a gossip without wetting their feet. And the worm-eaten wood of that cloister is of such a deep tone—black with age. The mass of glowing flowers—crimson hollyhocks, scarlet geraniums, and purple clematis—gain largely in brilliancy of effect with the dark wood of the cloister as a background.

All the attractions of the place seem to be concentrated round the church. Besides the almshouses, there is the beautiful old cross, with the Elizabethan manor house close by. The church is full of interest, beginning with the old sundial in the churchyard, having a wooden pedestal bearing the date 1775. Against one of the walls inside the church is a very curious object, and a somewhat unusual one, as only three of them are said to be in existence. It is a small head of coloured alabaster in high relief of Charles I., crowned. The head is encircled by two small female figures, one of them having in her hands a book, the other one holding scales. Somehow it seems so out of place. The pale colours of the painted model have almost a weird effect against the cold stone in the grey church. How did it come here, one wonders; why should it be found in this remote place; what is its history? It is said that the head was originally in the church, whence it was removed to the manor house, but afterwards once more it was returned to the sacred building. There it now is; one would like to know more about it.

In this country of ancient families passed away, and

LAMBOURNE.

[*To face page* 64.

in consideration of the life that existed here in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one expects to find interesting tombstones. One is not disappointed. The following epitaph beneath kneeling figures, in painted alabaster, is quaint:

"Thomas Garrard toke to his wife Agnes Blagrove, by whome he had issue Willm. and Elizabeth, Agnes ye first wife of Thomas Garrard departed ye life ye 28 July, 1556. Thomas Garrard her husband departed ye 24 of Dec., 1587. Wilm. Garrard their sonne most faithfully in memory of them caused ye monument to be erected. Wilm. departed this life ye XXI of July, 1608.

"Three more children at one birth Agnes had
Weare all baptzde
Hir in one grave laid.'

CHAPTER VI

FARINGDON

THAT under the commonplace garb of a stranger there is a possibility of angelic wings being concealed is a contingency not likely to occur to many of the Faringdon people. This may be, probably is, due to the fact of the little town being a terminus of the railway, at the end of a little branch line, so being in some degree cut off from communication with the outside world. "You might recommend the lady, as she is a stranger," was the kind suggestion of an old labourer to his wife. The old couple and I had become friendly; the remark was caused by my consulting them as to where I could pick primroses, and the likelihood of my obtaining leave to do so from the owner of the wood. In the natives of a place, among the sons and daughters of the soil, and in the working classes, one comprehends and is almost inclined to admire the feeling. When exceptions do occur, or when the prejudice has been overcome, one is glad; it signifies that congeniality which is always pleasant. But when a want of friendliness towards

FARINGDON.

[To face page 66.

strangers, or slowness to hold out the helping hand, influences the manners and conduct of people laying claim to some position and, one presumes, to a certain degree of culture, therefore to cosmopolitism, thoughts of quite a different nature are inspired. This, by the way.

There are two things which you will hear constantly mentioned at Faringdon; with the name of one of them you will be already familiar, the other will probably be new to you. The first is the White Horse Hill, the second is the Folly. "Give me the fresh air of the White Horse Hill, London's too smoky; it is not healthy"; the pride of possession inspires the words; one likes to hear them, just as one likes to hear it said over and over again when the weather is especially beautiful: "Ah, it must be fine up on White Horse Hill to-day; this is the sort of day to be on White Horse Hill." It makes one realise all that the White Horse Hill means to those people whose families for generations past have lived within touch and sight of it—how it is part of themselves; woven into the woof of their existence.

But the Folly. When I first went to Faringdon the Folly was not even so much as a name to me. "You must go and see the Folly; you will like that." No one told me what I was going to see. So I climbed the hill to the Folly, and found that it was nothing more, and nothing less, than a group of isolated fir-trees upon an eminence which forms a landmark to all the country round. Wonderful fir-trees they are—of

great height, with huge trunks and spreading tops. The lower branches are nearly all gone, pulled off doubtless for firewood. I know how it is done. As I came up the hill there were three little girls and a bigger boy all busily engaged in this mischief. The boy threw a noose over the branch, almost now the only one within reach; then he and the three little girls hung upon the rope and pulled. A few minutes longer, a little more pulling, and the branch would have been broken. But I appeared upon the scene. I begged them to desist, which they did, only probably till my back was turned. That branch, I felt sure, was doomed; the children would return to their work of destruction, and all my protestations be wasted.

The grove of fir-trees is round, like a crown upon the top of the hill. Underneath the trees you walk over the most deliciously soft turf, cropped just closely enough to be pleasant to the feet. Here much courting goes on; the place is made for it. There are rough seats, and a path has been cut right across the grass and another round the hill. And the view: it is a complete panorama, bounded by hills misty and grey by reason of their distance. Upon a clear day

"The snow-white courser stretching o'er the green"

is indistinctly visible—that is, if you know just where to look for it. For all the rest embraced by that wonderful panoramic view I must refer you to the effusion called "Faringdon Hill," by Henry James

Pye, Poet Laureate, of whom more hereafter. For myself, shall I make this confession?—I had no wish or any desire whatever for anything so prosaic as to know the names of the places within my sight. The view itself, the grey hills and the beautiful country in between, was enough. It would have afforded me absolutely no satisfaction to know that from the Folly I could see seven counties, or twelve, or even twenty. For while I sat upon one of those benches, very uncomfortably, as far as physical ease was concerned, I made a discovery, or rather a revelation came to me. The air was full of twitterings; above my head in the fir-trees a couple of wood-pigeons cooed continually. I became sensible of an indescribable vibration thrilling through Nature, a restlessness and movement, an eager stirring of suppressed life. And suddenly I knew what it all meant. The spring had come; it had come, too, actually a whole day in advance of the calendar.

Yesterday was Saturday. I had longed with such an intense longing for warmth and the sunshine; but the wind had howled louder and moaned more sadly than ever before. Now this is only Sunday, and the sky is blue—the blue of a turquoise. Yesterday there were stifled sobs; a wearied-out patience with the long, long winter. To-day all Creation is laughing and stretching out its hands towards happiness as towards a right. Now all is clear, for nothing but fruition can explain the seed-time, otherwise there would be no meaning in patience and hope. And

whether spring and the fulfilment of hope comes early or tarries long, every flake of snow, every storm of rain, each bitter wind, all the sadness of winter which is bound up in the eternal purpose must first be accomplished. Then, and not one moment sooner, will the spring be here. At this point my reflections were interrupted by a voice behind me: "Well, that's a rum sort o' game, that is." Looking round, I found that the remark proceeded from an old man; the game he referred to was the game of golf, which was being played by a man and a girl in the fields below the hill. I do not know how long the old man had been standing behind me. I suppose his conclusion was the result of some minutes' observation. But really, now that my attention was drawn to it, I felt very much inclined to agree with him. Viewed from a distance—by the uninitiated, shall I say?—golf *is* a very "rum sort o' game"; rather, the difficulty lies in believing it is a "game" at all. The girl stoops down and puts something upon the ground. There is a great deal of preliminary swinging of a stick or club, then one final swing, with no result whatever apparently, for if you are watching the game for the first time and from a distance you are probably not made aware that these mighty efforts are directed towards the precipitating into space of a tiny ball about the size of an egg. Then the man stoops, raises himself, and goes through the same blandishments, with the same exhibition of gigantic effort of strength. This being accomplished the pair start off, walk for some distance, stop, and go through

the same pantomime over again. It did look a very "rum sort o' game." I was not surprised at the contemptuous decision of a group of lads who had also stopped near me to watch, that they should "prefer football." Golf was perhaps a novel sensation to the Faringdonians.

But the pride they feel in their hill is no novel sensation to them. The sentiment expressed by the old man as he walked beside me down the path that he "shouldn't think there was another such hill in the kingdom," is probably largely the feeling amongst the natives of the little Berkshire town. They do not take its existence altogether as a matter of course either; if you question them on the subject you will find they have theories about it. Much mystery surrounds the Folly. There are many traditions and stories connected with it, the most obviously impossible one being that a member of the Pye family, once great folk at Faringdon, planted a tree of it every day! "There goes Pye and his Folly" the people are reported to have said as Mr. Pye was seen going up the hill upon his daily mission. The story may have some foundation in fact; it certainly possesses no connection with the Folly. The Pyes only came to Faringdon in 1621, and there is extant an old picture of Faringdon in 1630, in which the trees of the Folly appear to be almost as tall as they are now. The clump crowning Jasper's Hill, another height not far from the Folly, which was cut down about thirty years ago, also appears in the picture. No; we must

go farther back than this: the mystery surrounding the Folly is not so easily swept away. The suggestion that the origin of the name is simply "*folium*" certainly does not dispose of it. Long ago, ages before Alfred fought his battles, before even this bit of country formed part of the habitable world, there was perhaps a great forest here, of which this glorious group of trees alone remains. The supposition only deepens the mystery. And the pride of the Faringdon folk in their Folly is justified and comprehensible.

The memory of the Untons, or Umptons, of Wadley is kept green in Faringdon in a practical manner—by their generosity in founding blanket and other charities, details of which are painted up in the church. But the connection of the family with Wadley has been more or less forgotten. That "very old builded house," as it was described to me by a ploughman who was ploughing a field close by, lies not very far from the foot of Faringdon Hill. A few minutes' walk brings you down into the beautiful grass-land, within sight of the avenue and the fish-pond. The great fair which was held in the level grounds near Wadley House has been discontinued for many years now, though only within the memory of some of the oldest inhabitants. "And a good thing too" is the general opinion, for it was "a very dark fair"; the gipsies attended it in large numbers, and much fighting went on. The stocks were set up, and kept filled by the fighters, the drunkards, and the pick-pockets amongst the men. The women culprits—

incredible it seems, but true—were ducked in the fish-pond.

The height of the importance of the Unton family was reached probably in the sixteenth century, when Sir Edward Unton was at Wadley. He had been knighted by Queen Elizabeth at her Coronation, and married the daughter of the Duke of Somerset, the Protector of Edward VI., and widow of John Dudley, Earl of Warwick. Later, Sir Henry and Lady Unton, or the Countess of Warwick, as she was always called, entertained the Queen loyally at Wadley on her way to Bristol, her loyal host presenting her with "a juell of golde, garnished with dyamondes and rubyes, and fyve pearls pendante one bigger than the reste." Just before the death of her husband the unfortunate Lady Unton was declared to be of unsound mind; she only survived him for four years, during which time, from motives of affection presumably, her son had petitioned the Queen to allow him to have the custody of her. She was buried at Faringdon—she and her husband lie under an enormous tombstone bearing their recumbent effigies in the Unton Chapel. Not long ago the supplicating stone hands of Lady Unton had suffered violence and been broken off. And one day I went into the church and found an old man mending them. I entered into conversation with him. He seemed to possess that rare spirit, the spirit that animated the old masters, which indeed must animate any artist, provided that he really is an artist. He loved his work, not for its commercial value, but for itself.

No man, he said, could do any work of an artistic nature unless he loved it, or, indeed, of any kind unless his heart was in it. He did not do business "in a large way," because he went in for seeing to it all himself, and doing a small amount well, rather than undertaking a great amount of orders. It was a pleasure to talk to this man, his interest in and love of his life-work were so intelligent and so real. He was a cheery, bright-eyed little man. His home was in Somersetshire, and he took his holidays by going about to work in different places. Would that in these money-seeking days there were more like him!

The eldest son of Sir Henry and Lady Unton, Edward, was M.P. for Berkshire, and a quiet country gentleman. The more brilliant career was reserved for the second son, Henry. After leaving Oxford, he travelled in France and Italy. Eventually influence was used to bring him to the notice of Queen Elizabeth, and he was appointed ambassador to Henry IV. of France. He was a man of impulsive chivalry, warmly espousing the cause of his sovereign. When the young Duke of Guise incurred his displeasure for impudently, lightly, and overboldly speaking of her, he sent him a challenge proposing to meet him with whatever arms he should choose, on horseback or on foot; hastening to add, lest the Duke should presume to consider him in the slightest degree an unworthy opponent, that he would not have him think there was any inequality of person between them, "I being issued of as great a race and

noble house every way as yourself." And, "If you consent not to meet me, I will hold you and cause you to be generally held for the arrantest coward and most slanderous slave there lives in all France," continued Sir Henry, with some degree of arrogance. There were evidently doubts in his mind as to the acceptance of the challenge; his doubts were not unfounded. Three times it was repeated, but, after all, nothing came of it.

The ambassador was very popular with the French king, who went to visit him when he was dying of "purple fever" at La Fère. A curious picture in the National Gallery has a portrait of Sir Henry in the centre surrounded by little scenes showing the different events of his life, amongst them being the festivities at Wadley in connection with his wedding feast, and the quaint masque. There is also a fat Sir Henry in a nightcap lying most uncomfortably in a four-post bed, with the doctor bending over him. There is a picture of his funeral, with Faringdon Church before its steeple was knocked down; a long procession of mutes in black following the "baron's hearse," and a row of little boys sitting upon a wall to see the sight. The monument erected in Faringdon Church by Lady Unton has evidently suffered sad mutilation, probably in the Civil Wars. The figures of the knight and his lady which are shown in the picture are no longer there.

Once again there were royal guests at Faringdon when Dame Dorothy Unton during her widowhood entertained for two days King James I. and his

Queen. But the palmy days of Wadley were over. Sir Henry had left no children and an embarrassed estate. The property was eventually divided and passed out of the family.

Then the Pye family came upon the scene. Sir Robert Pye bought Faringdon House from the Untons just twenty years before the Civil War broke out, in which the Pyes and Faringdon took a prominent part. Sir Robert, who represented Woodstock in the Long Parliament, seems to have shared with his descendant, Henry James Pye, a fancy for versifying. He "loved the Muses," Ben Jonson said of him when, taking advantage of this predilection, he sent the member for Woodstock a rhyming petition for the arrears of his pension.

The prophecy that a man's foes should be those of his own household, fulfilled so often during the Civil War, was carried out to the letter in the case of the Pye family. Sir Robert's son Robert, who had married Anne, the daughter of John Hampden, took arms against the King. In 1646 he was sent by Fairfax to command the forces that were actually to besiege Faringdon. Long and bravely the town and Faringdon House, a Royal garrison, held out against the Parliamentarians. Great and lasting was the damage done. The steeple of the church was beaten down by the artillery; to this day the stumpy tower remains, denuded of its spire, and Faringdon was one of the last places to hold out for the King.

Anne Pye had passed through changes and chances

during her own life, but they had not the effect of making her tender or sympathetic, or even tolerant towards her son Hampden. The pride which was at the bottom of her cruelty to him saddened her later years. He had fallen in love with a beautiful peasant girl of Faringdon, and eventually married her. Then came the tragedy. His mother was furious at the *mésalliance*, and used her utmost influence to get him sent away from England to take part in the war against Spain. There he was killed; the beautiful wife died of grief soon afterwards.

From tragedy we pass to comedy, and the two brothers, Sir Thomas Pye, the Admiral, and Henry James Pye, Poet Laureate, the great-nephew of Hampden Pye. A life-sized bas-relief portrait of the Admiral ornaments his tomb in Faringdon Church, a tribute perhaps to his own estimation of himself. It is not a pleasing countenance, certainly; its one enormous feature earned him the name of "Nosey," and his figure was ungainly. Nevertheless he is said to have fancied himself irresistible in the eyes of every woman who beheld him. He had two wives; the first died childless—"The sorrow he felt at her Death He affectionately expressed by the Monument He erected to her Memory. But this loss was abundantly supplied by his happy union with Anne, daughter of Sir Benjamin Bathurst, a union more intimately endeared to him by a numerous issue of 16 children." Thus with unconscious humour is worded the record of his feelings upon his own tombstone.

An encumbered estate and debts to the amount of £50,000, added to the expenses of rebuilding the house, which was burnt down soon after he came into it, caused Henry James, afterwards Poet Laureate, to sell Faringdon. So the property passed out of the family. But Mr. Pye was M.P. for Berkshire, and as much, or perhaps even more than any other member of his family he is connected by the natives with Faringdon. Certainly not because they are proud of his powers as a poet; even the most humble critic amongst them bears witness to his inability. Poor Mr. Pye! his efforts as poetaster did not tend to raise him in the estimation of his fellows. At Oxford it was his own fault; he was fond of using his verses as a weapon against those who had offended him. Especially an instance of this was the case of a don who happened to be unpopular amongst the undergraduates, and with Mr. Pye in particular. The unfortunate man happened to fall in love with a young lady, who, not long afterwards, was married to a rich gentleman commoner, at college with Pye. Thus the unrequited affection of his senior was ridiculed by the poetic aspirant:

"Oh, Love! though Virgil's lays
  Resistless powers ascribe to thee,
Yet still I thought the sacred tribe
  Of Dullness ever free;
Potent I deem'd her ample shield
  Her favourite sons to save,
Tho' to thy soft dominion yield
  The virtuous and the brave;

But since the splendour of thy throne
Makes Muddinol obey,
I find myself compelled to own
Thy universal sway."

This cruel and witty effusion was freely circulated at Oxford, to the discomfiture, one can well imagine, of its unhappy victim.

Pye's weapon, later, was turned against himself. Scorn was cast upon him as a poet, while he was ridiculed in literary circles. "Poetical Pye," as Sir Walter Scott called him, was declared to be eminently respectable in everything but his poetry, in which he was contemptible. Byron thus refers to him:

"The monarch, mute till that, exclaimed, 'What, what!
Pye come again? No more, no more of that!'"

George Steevens, on reading one of his earlier efforts, in laughing contempt of the frequent allusions in it to vocal groves and feathered choirs, exclaimed—

"And when the pie was opened,
The birds began to sing,
And was not that a dainty dish,
To set before the king?"

One and all had a stone to cast at him. As he was not a poet, for his own sake be it hoped that he was not endowed with the sensitiveness of one. After his death the sarcasm aimed at his efforts continued, Southey, who succeeded him as Poet Laureate, declar-

ing one day that he had been rhyming as doggedly and dully as if his name had been Henry James Pye.

With regard to his feebleness as a rhymester and the absurdity of his appointment as Laureate, there can be no difference of opinion, but as member for his county he was respected; he was the last representative at Faringdon of an old and powerful family. Since then the property has changed hands many times.

A picturesque building is the old Town Hall of Faringdon, standing in the Market Place with the Crown Inn at its side. The latter was the Court House in times gone by for the trial of prisoners. In a corner of the building under the same roof as the Town Hall was a small cell called the Blind House, a dismal little place lighted only by a few bars of grating over the door—hence its name. The prisoners incarcerated in the Blind House, awaiting the coming of the magistrates, must have spent the time in somewhat cramped positions, the space being extremely limited. Their friends did their utmost to ameliorate their misfortunes by squeezing packets of tobacco and eatables through the bars of the prison. These sympathetic people outside had also an ingenious device lest the inmates of the Blind House should chance to suffer from thirst. The bowl end of a long clay pipe was inserted into a pot of beer. The other end found its way into the mouth owned by a thirsty soul inside the cell, the prisoners standing in turn upon the lock of the door in order to reach the refreshing draught. Much squabbling must have gone on over that friendly pipe,

FARINGDON CHURCH.

[*To face page* 80.

and some difference of opinion as to when each turn had come to an end, or perhaps—who knows?—there was honour among thieves, and the whole thing was arranged amicably.

Just outside the door of the Blind House the stocks were set up, and the passers-by were treated to glowering looks from the prisoners in them. In most villages the stocks were placed just outside the church gate in order that the righteous glances of the church-goers might have the effect of still more putting the delinquents to shame. A primitive idea of punishment, this idea of openly shaming wrong-doers; harmless, perhaps, but not very elevating either for the spectators or for those who were looked at.

"If they were put in the stocks when the people went into church there they had to stop till 'em came out again," an old man told me. He himself, so the story goes, had been the last man to occupy the stocks in Faringdon. But as to this occurrence he maintained a rigid silence—"Oh, yes, he remembered the stocks well enuf"—but nothing more. The lapse of time I thought might have invested the situation with some humour in his eyes—turned it, in fact, into a huge joke. I was grievously mistaken.

Faringdon is full of legends and memories of King Alfred. The story of the burning of the cakes, of course, is located there; how many are the places where those cakes were burnt! Built in amongst a crowd of cottages in a narrow street is an old house, now divided into two cottages and called Bull's Eye

Castle, the name originating doubtless from the round windows in the upper part of the house, which have been filled with stone. It is a quaint old brick building; local legend declares that King Alfred died or slept or did something there—exactly what it was no one is sure. The house is quaint and old enough to justify the stories. The Salutation Inn opposite the church is said to have been the place of Alfred's palace, but there again facts are faltering. How can it be otherwise? The place of Alfred's death is not known; though it is certain that he had a palace at Faringdon, there is no distinct knowledge as to its site. Wantage is more fortunate in being able to prove itself the place of his birth.

Can one wonder, though, that these traditions should have been handed down, or that the towns within sight of the White Horse Hill should have been anxious to claim any connection possible with the great and good monarch who, within a century of his death, was thus described: "famous, warlike, victorious King, the zealous protector of widows, scholars, orphans, and the poor; skilled in the Saxon poets; affable and liberal to all; endowed with prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance; most patient under the infirmity which he daily suffered, a most stern inquisitor in executing justice; vigilant and devoted in the service of God"?

CHAPTER VII

TOM BROWN'S COUNTRY

NOT many years ago there died a man who loved King Alfred's country and the Downs, every square inch of them, within a ride or walk of his home; who wrote about them and made them his own, getting to know all the countryfolk and their ways and songs and stories, and going over the fields and hills till he made friends of them all. The early days of Mr. Thomas Hughes were lived within sight of the Ridge Way in the Vale of White Horse; there was born the classic Tom Brown, and there he roamed before his schooldays and during his holidays with Bengy, that cheery, humorous, kind-hearted old man, full of sixty years of Vale gossip and all sorts of helpful ways for young and old, but above all for children. King Alfred's country and Tom Brown's country are synonymous terms in a double sense, for in that part of the world and amongst the country people Mr. Thomas Hughes went, and is still called, by the familiar name of Tom Brown.

His family belonged to Uffington, the little place

at the foot of the White Horse hills. His grandfather was Vicar of the village, living in an old house near the church, long since pulled down, when the only communication with London was by coach from Wantage, which was seven miles away. His father, who had sporting tastes, rented a stretch of the Downs above Uffington from Lord Craven for shooting; hunting was also an amusement he indulged in until the birth of his fourth son, when he made the by no means unusual discovery that hunting and the bringing up of a family did not agree well together. So he sold his hunters and sent his pink coat to Faringdon to be dyed black, a somewhat dubious proceeding, for the colour always showed at the seams. He had made the offering at the shrine of economy, however; that, doubtless, was an adequate compensation.

Whether she ever lived permanently at Uffington I do not know, but the country people still speak of Mr. Hughes' great-grandmother as Madame Hughes. The appellation was given her by an elderly fishmonger, whose stall she was wont to visit at Billingsgate before breakfast to bargain for fish. She was a well-known figure at the market apparently, and great attention was paid to her by the fish-people, who welcomed and respected her.

Considerable character must have been possessed by another member of this family, whose husband was also Vicar of Uffington. He died leaving her very insufficiently provided for. Nothing daunted, she sold

off everything, using the proceeds of the sale for stocking a small dairy farm. She gave up all her old habits, rose early and worked late; in the same country where she had joined in county society living the life of a farmer. And this course of action in those days must have meant a far greater amount of courage and individuality than it would in these. She lived to reap the reward of her labours; to see her daughter comfortably portioned and married, and her son, to whom she had given a Cambridge education, Master of the Temple. While in that position he preached at Whitehall before George II. and his mistress a pointed sermon upon the words of Nathan to David, "Thou art the man." Evidently he inherited his mother's courage and indomitable spirit.

When you leave the train at Uffington you are in the heart of the Vale and the country of Tom Brown. It was at this little station that Dick alighted when he went to stay with his friend Joe, and his sweet sister Lucy, who had never been out of Berkshire in her life; who would sit in the evening stitching at a patchwork coverlet, fitting in all sorts of scraps of silk in the prettiest patterns in the world, while Dick talked in a low voice, in order not to disturb the old lady sleeping in her chair, about London and how people lived there and what they thought, falling in love with sweet Lucy while he did so.

Right up behind the station is the "Swan," the little red-brick inn where Joe put up the pony when he and Dick made their famous expedition to White Horse

Hill. And, very soon, a little further along the road, you can see the hill for yourself. "There it stands, right up above all the rest, 900 feet above the sea, and the boldest, bravest shape for a chalk hill that you ever saw." Thus enthusiastically breaks out Mr. Hughes in praise of his beloved bit of country. Some authorities have tried to cast doubt upon the fact of the Horse being a memorial of Saxon victory; Mr. Hughes will have none of it. "When antiquarians differ," he says, "the tradition of the countryside may always be pretty safely believed. For the country people hold to such stories and hand them down." Fain would one feel that he is right. When I first came within sight of that hill after leaving Uffington, I said to myself, "Of course he is; he must and shall be." Half the romance of the country would vanish into thin air if the White Horse were not carved by the Saxons after the great battle of Ashdown, where the good King Alfred made a final and splendid effort, where the Danes were routed, and peace and freedom once more assured.

One may differ, it is true, from the old chronicler in thinking that the figure of the animal is described in so masterly a manner that it may defy the painter's skill to give a more exact description. He also was enthusiastic to the point of exaggeration. Nevertheless, it is a wonderful piece of work, and considering the size of the horse—it covers an acre of ground—the proportions are rather marvellous. The head had suffered and wanted reparation; the extremities of

the hinder legs, from their unavoidable situation, the old chronicler goes on to say in his quaint way, when he saw the horse, had by the fall of rains been filled up in some measure with the washings from the upper part, so that in the nearest view of him, the tail, which had not suffered the same inconvenience and had continued entire from the beginning, seemed longer than the legs. Seeds of grass and plants fall into the trench which forms the animal, and growing up, obscure its shape. So it is necessary from time to time to clean it out. The operation is now performed in a very prosaic manner. But in olden times the scouring of the White Horse was the opportunity for feasting and merriment, with sports and all kinds of games. These scourings took place about every five years, but after 1825 there was an interval until 1838. Then the ancient custom was once more revived through the efforts of Lord Craven. The *Reading Mercury* of that time comments on the auspicious time chosen for this revival, the period of a double event, in which our youthful and beloved Queen first wore the British crown, and in which an heir was born to the ancient and noble house of Craven.

At the scouring of 1843, Simon Stone, the far-famed Somersetshire backsword champion, was present and all the old-fashioned games took place. By 1857 the scouring had assumed a comparatively modern character. Wombwell's menagerie travelled down to Berkshire for the event. And a tremendous struggle there was to get the caravan up the hill; it stuck

fast four or five times, in spite of the efforts of twenty-four horses to get it along. The marvel is, not that it stuck half-way, but that it ever reached the top at all.

We are apt to smile sometimes at the ingenuity and inventive powers of the modern advertiser, and his avidity to seize upon any passing occurrence or fact that will serve his purpose. But can the ingenuity of any modern advertiser beat that of a Vale tradesman who seventy years ago applied the Saxon victory to an advertisement of his home-made ketchup?

> "Deer is the vendor's native town
> (Though cheap the product of his skill),
> There Alfred battled for his Crown,
> And graved the White Horse on our Hill—
> Our Hill of picnic spots the chief,
> Where fair ones couched on flowery moss
> Enjoy our matchless Vale-fed beef,
> Married to Goodman's matchless Sauce."

I wonder whether rooks ever cawed more loudly or with more mad delight than the rooks were cawing in the elms just outside Uffington station that day I went to Longcot, the little village where Mr. Thomas Hughes so often used to stay at the Vicarage with his brother, who was the Vicar.

A week had passed since I made the discovery that the spring had come; the rooks were well on with their building. Most wonderful event, seven whole days had there been of uninterrupted sunshine. Everything possessing life, animate or inanimate, with the

exception perhaps of foolish human beings, had been busy making the most of them. The hedgerows teemed with delights and surprises. Everything was made new, as though this were the first year in all the world's history. The buds had already broken into bunches of crisp, purple-blue leaves on the pale stems of the alders. The chestnut-trees were covered with sticky brown tips. Palm Sunday being close at hand, the willows or "sallies," as the country people call them, had donned their silky grey fur, to be covered a little later for Easter with a more festal garment, sprinkled with gold dust. Here and there amongst the new green, under the hedge, a celandine lifted its little polished face to reflect the sun. The dandelion, because of its rarity, was not a weed but a beautiful flower. Above it hovered a butterfly, a pale saffron fellow fresh from its prison. Can the joy caused by the first butterfly in the spring ever grow stale? Over the ploughland a lark is poised on quivering wings. The air is full of melody, for every voice silent all through the long months of winter has become articulate. In the woods bordering a part of the road between Uffington and Longcot more rooks are engaged in more building operations; pigeons with a delicious gurgle are making love, while a jay shrieks—unmusically, I had almost said; but is any little voice raised in greeting to the spring unmusical, even the frog's? Hundreds of them were croaking, engaged in family arrangements, in a pond in the garden of a deserted house close to Longcot. I

turned aside to see. The pond was close to the gate; as I opened it, immediately all sound and all movement ceased. Where a moment before had been heaving brown backs and gaping mouths, appeared only a mass of inanimate spotted jelly.

Longcot maypole was the last to disappear in those parts of Berkshire. It was the envy of all the villages round, but it came to an untimely end at last, Mr. Hughes tells us, for it was sawn up for fear there should be murder done over it, and given to the old for firewood at Christmas. Jealousy was the reason of the catastrophe. "Thirty Ashbury chaps came and dug it up," and carried it away on hand-spikes; then the Uffington men seized it and took it there. There was a fight over it with the Lambourne men, who threw scalding water over their opponents, so to avoid further difficulties Parson Watts caused stringent measures to be taken, and the Longcot maypole ceased to exist.

Babies abound in Longcot—though, for that matter, where do they not?—and the mothers seem to have plenty of time to stand in groups at their gates to gossip and enjoy the sun, with the babies in their arms or in perambulators—a distinct advantage in the matter of health for the babies. A dear old woman in a lilac sunbonnet, whose husband, judging by his name, was probably a scion of a once powerful family in that part of the country, was digging in her garden. I made a remark to her as I passed, and she smiled so pleasantly that I stayed to talk, resting my

elbow on the little wooden gate. She was only digging for pleasure, she assured me, when I apologised presently for hindering her work. And a pleasure indeed it must be, when you are nearly eighty, to be able to dig as she was digging on that sunny spring day with such vigour and energy. The little flower-bed that bordered the path from the gate to the cottage door was full of clumps of sweet blue violets and half-opened spring flowers. Wouldn't I like to come in and pick some? she asked, an invitation I lost no time in accepting.

She was proud of her garden, her own cabbage-patch, with the pride of possession which is so strong in the breasts of most English men and women. The feeling is completely bound up with English life, but it is by no means universally shared by the people of other nations. Not long ago in Norway I was noticing the almost general absence of gardens surrounding the houses. The want of them was rather striking, and I mused about it, wondering what was its probable cause. After all, I came to the conclusion it was sufficiently obvious: the soil is hard and unkind, and the difficulty in its cultivation so extreme that the Norwegian had either long ago given it up in despair, or instinct had taught him the futility of attempting it. Later I happened to speak on the subject to a native, a man who belonged to the labouring class, was a sea pilot, and had piloted Queen Victoria through the Fjords. In connection with this employment he had visited England and

could speak English, hence the possibility of my carrying on a conversation with him. He quickly scattered to the winds the obvious conclusion I had come to. His reason for the absence of gardens, far from being an obvious one, was altogether unexpected, so difficult is it for the people of one nation to absolutely realise the sentiments and feelings of those of another, so rarely is the point of view quite the same.

"What did people want gardens for," said the Norwegian, "when they had the country before their eyes, and all the flowers upon the mountains and in the fields?" He could understand if one lived in the suburbs of London and had a little garden that one would value and treasure it, but in the country it seemed to be altogether a superfluity. The idea is interesting and somewhat poetical, but as the thoughts and ideas of a people must be in a great measure the result of their environment, perhaps this individual appropriation by the Norwegian of all the beauties of Nature lying spread before his eyes, the making them his own, as it were, by virtue of the sense of sight, may have been bred in him by the very fact which I alluded to—the arduous labour that the cultivation of a garden of his very own would entail.

And all the time, while she used her fork at intervals, and I was gathering for myself a bunch of her delicious violets, my old friend in her little English garden was chatting pleasantly. She talked of Madame Hughes at Uffington and Mr. Thomas Hughes,

who was known as Tom Brown. She had his books, "a tract sort of copy"; her husband read to her from the "Scouring of the White Horse" in the evening. For generations her people had belonged to Longcot; she had got her schooling in the little school near the church. There, in one of the two rooms of a tiny creeper-grown cottage, occupied now by the clerk, a Mrs. Partridge kept school and taught the village girls to read and write, and sew, and mark samplers. And pleasant it must have been for the scholars in that little room, with the door leading right into the rose-covered porch, the lattice window opening into the garden, and the rooks cawing in the churchyard elms close by. In winter their lot was not so happy, for being warm went by favour. Truly shocking bribery and corruption went on under the innocent-looking thatched roof of that little school. The scholars were supposed to bring contributions towards the upkeep of the school fire, and only those fortunate ones who were able to beg, borrow, or steal a stick, or a knob of coal, which they used to carry wrapped up in a piece of newspaper, were allowed to sit near the fire. The rest, with blue fingers and red noses, for the room was probably draughty, shivered outside. Children are thoughtless beings, and a dozen of them sitting round the fireplace would certainly effectually keep away even a sight of the grateful glow from those outside the circle.

Whether the same unrighteous system was practised by the boys' pedagogue I cannot say. Their school

was just opposite, tucked into a corner of the churchyard, and actually within its walls. A queer little place it must have been: a brick building about eighteen feet square. It looks like a tool-house or a stable; now the church coal is kept there. Upon a board over the door is painted a text which the rain and sun of many years have done their best to obliterate. And so well have they succeeded that only with careful scrutiny, and the judicious addition of a word here and there, is it possible to make out that it is a text at all. "And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever." The queer, unpretentious little place seems so out of keeping with the grandeur of the beautiful words. Yet, after all, why? For the wisdom spoken of by the prophet is not the wisdom of book-learning, nor does the acquiring of it by the scholars depend upon the size in cubic inches of their school. And somehow I think that old woman in the lilac sunbonnet, who was digging in her garden, had learnt it.

The writer of the following letter to a local outfitter neither joined the magic circle by the fire in the creeper-covered cottage nor shivered miserably outside it. She probably did her lessons comfortably in the even temperature of the new red-brick parish school. Mrs. Partridge must have died long before she was born; the old dame could not have been responsible for her education; and, after all, perhaps her scholars would have done as well:—

"I arse please Mister Godding Will you please send 2 sut of dark Cloes for my to Bouys one six and one 14 please Mister Will you send it By Mister Bucher Will you send it as Dark as you Can dear sar me Wod not trouble you only their onkle jest ded me Will pay you plese let me have it on Sataday for Sunday plese send 2 caps."

The spelling may leave much to be desired, but the meaning is at any rate clear.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE VALLEY OF THE KENNET

I HAVE remarked already elsewhere, but at the risk of being accused of tediousness or of repeating myself I am constrained to say once again, that Berkshire is a county of surprises. Therefore, if Mr. George Moore is right in his definition of happiness as the faculty for being surprised, given the necessary capacity, there is plenty of room and opportunity for felicity in Berkshire. Also, as I have said before, the better one gets to know the country, the more this special peculiarity strikes one. No satiety is possible, or any weariness caused by monotony. Not indeed that such a thing as motonony in nature can possibly exist anywhere, except for the merely casual observer. But in Berkshire, even for the casual observer, monotony is absent. I think this feature of variety is one of the chief attractions of the county, one of its charms. Infinite change, infinite interest, endless uncertainty. There are the Downs, over which we have lately been wandering; there is the Thames with all its luxuriance of distinctive beauty, to say nothing of the smaller

THE LOCK, MIDGHAM.

[*To face page* 96.

rivers. Berkshire is well watered. Then there are the woods, the copses of hazel, oak, and beech and alder; there are the fir-woods, solemn, and quiet, and grand, and restful, as some great cathedral; there are the commons; scenery to suit every mood and every temperament; and to some natures, certainly, to some moods, I think the commons will especially appeal. The

> "Solitary places; where we taste
> The pleasure of believing what we see
> Is boundless, as we wish our souls to be."

There are many commons in Berkshire, each one differing from the others, each one possessing its own distinctive features; each of them beautiful, so beautiful that it is difficult to decide to which one to give the palm. Acknowledging this, therefore, I will not say that the most beautiful of them all is Crookham, but that is one of the most beautiful. It lies parallel with the great Bath road, to the south of it. Cutting it right through the middle, stretches a perfectly straight road, so straight that you can see almost the whole length of its four miles. And from nowhere else, surely, can the glorious pageant of the sunset better be watched, or the gathering storm with its attendant mass of clouds.

Colour is a distinctive feature of Crookham Common; golden furze, purple heather; here and there the scarlet of a golf coat dotted about over the links. Some uncommon species of bramble are to be found; of blackberries in the autumn there is a rare harvest.

You may be crossing the common towards evening. Away, in the distance, lies ridge upon ridge of woods and hills bathed in a billowy mist of pearl and ever-changing gradations of grey. The outlines of the hills are soft but distinct. Now and then a little amber feather of vapour floats across the sky. Patches of yellow lichen cover the ground at intervals, gleaming absolutely golden under the evening sun. A faint almondy odour coming from the furze bushes growing everywhere in thick and ragged masses fills the air. Towards the south, in the middle-distance, the ground is more undulating, falling away even into a deep dip, so that the tops of trees growing at the bottom of the hollow appear on a level with the gorse bushes upon its edge. Blue smoke curling up from a scarcely visible chimney proclaims a human dwelling. Now, that wonderful moment is at hand when Nature seems to pause before the day sinks into the arms of night—the moment of mysterious hush and silence at sunset.

Twice within the last few years has the solitude of the common been broken, when the troops camped there at the time of the manœuvres. A more convenient camping spot could not have been chosen. A pretty sight it was, and one thoroughly appreciated by the inhabitants of the adjacent villages, who trooped up in parties every evening, after work hours, to chat with the soldiers and inspect the camp. The cottagers, it is true, were poorer by a few cats and kittens, even by a dog or two, after the troops had departed; the

sons of Mars are proverbially fond of pets. But the Berkshire people bore them no grudge for that, and showed that they did not by being up and out at all hours of the morning to bid them farewell and watch them march away. The little post-offices were kept very busy, for wives and sweethearts had to be informed that the regiments were on their way back to quarters. From one little office the post-mistress, with conscious importance, announced the fact that no fewer than forty telegrams were despatched in the one morning. The exciting break caused by the manœuvres in the monotony of village life will not quickly be forgotten.

About fifty years ago there lived in a corner of Crookham Common a man called Coudrey, about whom weird tales were told. He was said to be a wizard, and able to "lay spells." Woe to any person who interfered with him. No electrical bells or contrivances were necessary in this man's house for the purpose of catching thieves; he employed a much simpler means. One misguided individual foolishly, not to say wickedly, once ventured into this reputed wizard's garden, his object being to steal cabbages. But while he was in the act of pulling them up, suddenly he found himself surrounded by water, so deep that there he was obliged to remain all night. In the morning both he and his theft were discovered. Another equally foolish person attempted to steal some blocks of wood belonging to this mysterious individual. He found himself, with his ill-gotten gains, actually in the wizard's room, confronted by him.

Another story is told of Coudrey. A carter who had

lost a pony went to ask him where it was. The wizard told him that there was likely to be a storm, that he had better hurry home, but that when he got there he would find the pony; adding, at the same time, that it would not be advisable to keep it. The carter remarked that it looked very unlike rain; however, his belief in Coudrey's powers of prophecy caused him to set off homewards. Before he reached his destination, sure enough, a terrific storm broke over him, and down came the pony in the rain, right in front of him. He took the animal home, but, as Coudrey had foretold, was not able to keep it. The story does not go on to relate whether the carter was forced to sell his animal, or whether it mysteriously disappeared again.

The hero of all these strange stories was a farmer, harmless no doubt, pursuing his daily avocations, probably, like any other man of his calling. Yet, for some unaccountable reason, this atmosphere of mystery surrounded him; he was accredited with supernatural powers; numerous, indeed, were the dread things and doings that attached themselves to him.

When he was dying he is said to have justified it all by acknowledging his commerce with the powers of evil. "Much," he said, "has been done by scholarship, but as for me, I have had dealings with the Devil."

At one time murders were common occurrences in Berkshire. When a crime had not been brought home a weird and horrible act was occasionally performed. The suspected murderer was taken with the corpse up into the church tower, the idea being that if the guilty

person touched the dead body it would bleed. Upon one occasion, long after the murder had been committed, this dreadful test was tried. Imagination shrinks from picturing the horrors of the scene. It happened at the little village of Brimpton, but in this case it was unsuccessful, the reason of the failure being, the old cottager who told the story added naïvely, that "the bones were too dry."

Newbury lies at the western extremity of Crookham Common; at the eastern end is the village of Brimpton. Here the Templars had a preceptory which afterwards, when the Order was dissolved in the fourteenth century, came into the possession of the Hospitallers. There you may see still the remains of their ancient chapel, now, alas! used as a barn. Close by at Shalford, on the little river Enbourne, there are other remains of the Hospitallers, and a yew alley which is called the Nuns' Walk.

The little river Enbourne divides the county of Hampshire from that of Berkshire. At Hyde End, which is a hamlet of Brimpton, and lies just within the latter county, the dreamy sleepiness of the little river has been interfered with and its course somewhat diverted. A trout farm has been established there, and stews made to contain the fish in various stages of their development. The spawn is kept in narrow ducts; afterwards, when grown to sufficient size, the fish are drafted off into the enclosed portions of the river, finally being despatched by rail in special cans, very like those that milk is sent in; not to be

eaten—at least not yet—but to stock streams and rivers, doubtless to be caught again eventually.

The care and culture of the trout is no sinecure, for the river must be carefully watched; it must not be too high nor too low. If it rises too high the fish run the risk of being flooded, and finally left high and dry upon the banks. While, on the other hand, if the water sinks too low, this is equally dangerous for the fish. A most ingenious electric contrivance rings two bells in the old mill where the fishery-keeper lives, to give warning of either of these contingencies happening. The trout have many enemies, too; one of the worst, alas! is supposed to be the kingfisher. The keeper is not merciful should he happen to have his gun when the brilliant little emerald-green body flashes past towards the sedges. The destruction of this most beautiful of English birds, now rapidly becoming rare, is very sad; it weighs heavily in the scales against pisciculture.

Should you happen to be at the fishery at feeding time, you will find it an amusing and interesting performance. The food—not a pleasant-looking concoction—is minced and chopped-up horseflesh. A horrible idea seizes one that those two broken-down old horses, so happily munching the grass in the field close by, are getting ready, and only waiting their turn to produce a further supply of the commodity. Never mind, do not think of it; the horses are contented and happy now, their end will be merciful, doubtless—and fishes must be fed. In their manner of feeding is found a

vast difference. The common brown, or Loch Leven troutlets, feed quietly, accepting whatever happens to come, without any show of eagerness whatsoever. Slow, placid sort of fellows they are, taking life easily, and troubling themselves apparently very little about it. With the other species, the rainbow trout, it is all a very different matter. He is a restless, excitable creature, and darts greedily at his food, flashing and flickering to the surface, twisting his body rapidly, so that the light catches it. And as hundreds, or even thousands, of them are all doing the same thing at the same moment, the water has the appearance of an ever-moving kaleidoscope of silver and iridescent tint. The natures and temperaments of fish are evidently just as differing as are the natures and temperaments of human beings.

The trout that breeds naturally in the Enbourne is small, but the pike grow to a fine size. One shell-fish, however, which has either become scarce, or absent altogether from other rivers, is always to be found in this Berkshire stream. I mean the crayfish. Do you know them?—funny, uncanny, lobster-like creatures that they are. I do not mean in the fish-mongers' shops, after they have been boiled and turned scarlet, or when they are brought to table. But do you know them alive, and mud-coloured? have you made their acquaintance in their native haunts? in short, have you ever been upon a crayfishing expedition? If you never have, come with me. It will be a new experience for you.

Crayfishing must be done when it is dark; the fish will not move much in the day-time; we must not start till towards dusk. We will take the little cart and the old donkey, for the nets are heavy to carry; we can take the cart right down into the fields, and tie the donkey to a gate-post till we have finished. The rest of the party will walk, or go on their bicycles. The nets are put into the cart; the bait—well, that some obliging garden or stable boy has attended to; it is not a pleasant process. Crayfish are fond of liver that has "hung" for some indefinite period; they love savoury meat.

So we start, through the darkening lanes. Now and then a belated labourer, whose work has taken him far from home, wishes us "Good-night." The donkey—as is the manner of his kind—is somewhat erratic in his movements, occasionally going at a hand-gallop, afterwards relapsing into a slow walk. It does not matter: there is no hurry, the evening is warm and delicious, and going at a slow pace is no hardship. How quiet it is; how restful, after the roar of the London streets!

The last of the light has faded, dusk is growing into darkness, the stars are beginning to appear as we turn into the fields. Thump, bump, with a good deal of jolting over some deep ruts; through a gateway, across a field of very uneven going, through another gateway, over some more ruts, which have recently been full of water and soft mud, but now are dry and rough, and we have arrived at our destination. Near the river the

grass is long; very soon, if we are to have a fine day on the morrow, it will be wet, so for a crayfishing expedition it is necessary to have thick boots.

Leaving the donkey to its own devices, having secured it to a post, we cross the field towards the river, if river it can be called, for it is really nothing more than a little stream, almost hidden by bushes and the high grassy banks beneath which it has sunk. Upon these banks here and there may be found the beautiful American balsam (*Impatiens bicolor*), now become naturalised, with its bright orange-coloured flowers, so much more showy than most of the English field-flowers.

The overgrown pools are the best places for crayfishing, though the movements of crayfish are undependable. Sometimes they will frequent one particular pool, sometimes another; you can never be quite sure where you will find them. Neither can you be certain whether you will have good sport or bad. Crayfish are moody creatures; for some unknown reason of their own, if they are not so inclined, even the most savoury morsel will fail to please them. Occasionally they have been known to resist the temptations of the best "hung" and most gamey piece of meat.

Having chosen a spot that seems likely, a deep dark pool, overhung with trees upon the farther side, we make our first venture. The net is suspended over the water by a long crooked stick, the string being gradually paid out over it. There is a soft, almost inaudible splash; weighted by its iron ring, the flat net sinks

to the bottom. Another net is lowered, a little farther off, then another and another, till all our ventures are made. Nothing is left to do now but wait. Fishing always means waiting, and waiting means patience, and patience of all virtues is the most unornamental and the hardest to attain. But patience sometimes wins its reward. Perhaps it will be so in the case of our crayfishing. Meanwhile, it is better to wait in silence, or, at any rate, to talk quietly. Crayfish are reported, with what measure of truth it is difficult to say, to be afraid of the human voice. And nature keeps us company in silence. Now and then a grasshopper raises his small voice, to make the silence more intense; sometimes a bird rustles in the branches, or you hear the heavy breathing of the cows that are feeding at the farther end of the field. Now we may venture to prove our luck. We will begin with the first net that was lowered, and so on one after another. We should never find the line at all were it not for the little piece of rag that is tied to the end of each of them and lies like a white butterfly upon the bank for a guide. With breathless suspense the first net is hauled up; a rustling noise proceeding from it as it comes near proclaims that there is something in it. A moment later and a heap of little mud-coloured creatures with wriggling bodies and fighting claws are lying on the ground. You must pick them up by the middle of their backs if you do not want a sharp pinch; those little nippers would soon make the fact very forcibly known that you cannot handle a crayfish

anyhow with impunity. So one net after another is taken out of the water; in some there are fish, some come to land empty. Now and again an annoying thing happens: just as the net is lifted out of the water, over it will tip; with a splash, back goes a crayfish home again. Perhaps it was the result of clumsiness, perhaps that particular crayfish bore a charmed life—who can tell? If he is wise he will resist the temptations of a highly seasoned but unknown meal for the future.

It is curious, sometimes, that a superstition will continue in the face of all evidence of its untruth. I am alluding to the saying in some parts of the country that if you take a crayfish out of the water the stream will dry up. Over and over again this saying must obviously have been proved false, yet in spite of this you may still occasionally stumble across it.

We have had good sport. We can afford to let a few of the funny little mud-coloured beings escape. Now it is time to go home; we make our way under the starlight through the thick white blanket which to the height of a few feet covers the grass. It is damp and chilly; wet feet we should certainly get, were we not provided with strong country boots.

Another beautiful day will greet us on the morrow; we may thank the mist for giving us that assurance. So with the donkey, his stable in view, galloping at a pace that would mean danger should anything obstruct the path, we go recklessly home through the lanes to our beds.

CHAPTER IX

SOME STRANGE STORIES

"THERE wur enough witches and wizards living round Cottington Hill, at one time, to drag a ton load o' stones up it." This astounding announcement was made to me two or three years ago by an old Berkshire labourer in broad daylight; and, let me hasten to add, the man was quite sober, and very much in his right senses. Cottington Hill is in Hampshire, just over the border, but being such a familiar landmark and object to the Berkshire people, it almost seems to belong to them. Its top is crowned with a tuft of trees, visible from many points, and it is an eminence of no mean height. As I scramble up it, the exertion of conveying my own body to the top makes me shudder to think of that ton load of stones, and the uncanny character the country surrounding it must once have borne.

Not so very far from here, within the memory of some of the older folk, three witches are reported to have been buried alive, or "quick," as the country people express it. One can only conclude that their

WOOLHAMPTON VILLAGE.

[To face page 108

heads were left aboveground, for the story goes that one of the three wretched women lived longer than the other two, because someone threw her an apple-core to eat. There are discrepancies and apparent impossibilities in the narrative, certainly. How could she have eaten the apple if her arms were covered by the earth? As the woman was accredited with being a witch, we can only conclude that she was also endowed with extraordinary powers. As I have heard the story with every detail corresponding from various of the old people living in villages quite far apart from each other, I can only suppose that something of the kind must have happened. Some measure of veracity is probably contained in the story, some origin there must be with at least a little truth in it.

The popular fallacy at the present day, I am perfectly aware, is that the belief in witches has completely died out—that education, and civilisation, and enlightenment have killed it. So it appears, certainly—upon the surface. But take the trouble to probe at all deeply, and you will begin to doubt whether the popular idea is not merely a delusion. The younger portion of the population, it is true, would scoff at these primitive beliefs, and treat them as "rubbish" and a pack of nonsense—though I should be sorry to say that even they in their heart of hearts do not still give them a sneaking credulity. But the old people who have imbibed them from their infancy, though, perhaps, they are growing to be a little dubious of them—in this there is something rather pathetic—hug them tight.

They will not speak of them: a person's inmost beliefs and thoughts are not laid bare to the general and unsympathetic gaze. And they are all this—these to us impossible myths, and fairy-tales, these archaic superstitions—to the simple folk who hold them. They must not be handled roughly nor irreverently smiled at. But gain the confidence of some of these country people, treat them as human beings, and they will respond to the human touch. When you have sat for some time in a cottage upon a Sunday afternoon with an old labourer, and have joined in a laugh with him; when he reluctantly sees you depart with the invitation to "come again and stop a hour or two, for I loikes yer company," you will find that you have heard a good deal that is interesting and worth hearing during the visit. From the lips of some old man or old woman who goes to church regularly every Sunday you may (though I do not promise it) hear such weird and wonderful tales, and the acknowledgment of such beliefs, as would astonish the clergyman or the district visitor, and horrify them too (I mean, of course, those of the ordinary type). That you will hear very much—again let me repeat it—is by no means certain. I myself have been tacitly snubbed. More than once, when I have thought that friendliness and confidence warranted my approaching these subjects, the conversation has been pointedly changed. "I'd sooner talk about anything else than them nasty ole black witches," a dear old body once said, somewhat pathetically. I had enjoyed an hour's talk over her fire. She had told me some

delightful things, had even become so enthusiastic in talking about old times that she tried to sing me some songs she used to sing long ago when she was a girl in the hayfield. She told me some witch stories; then compunction seized her, doubt as to the wisdom of her communications, fear, perhaps, of the consequences of speaking unadvisedly of these mysterious beings.

A Berkshire woman once told me that when she was a girl in service her mistress used to tell her that if she saw a large hare in the lane she need not be afraid, it was only old Mrs. A., who, by the same token, was a reputed witch. This woman was only about sixty at the time she told me the story.

The transformation of a witch into a hare was a common belief. A story is told in Berkshire of a man, who was out walking one evening with his dog, seeing a witch called Maria Chandler in the road. When the dog went at her she turned into a hare. The dog followed the hare, biting and tearing it. And the next morning Maria Chandler was found to be all bitten and torn as by a dog. This same Maria Chandler is said to have bewitched a young man. He was always ailing, and could never succeed in his undertakings. When the witch died he became well and strong and able to do anything he wished. Another old woman who was a reputed witch used to go to a house, where the woman who told me the story was in service as a girl, to fetch milk. One day the cook said to the girl, "I should like to know for certain whether she is a witch; when she comes in the morning get two old brooms

and lay them crosswise upon the doorstep. If she is a witch she will jump over them, if she is not she will just step over them." The cook, you see, anticipating possible evil results from the experiment, evidently refrained from trying it herself. The girl did as she was told, and the old woman jumped over the brooms. She was very angry, for evidently she realised that a trap had been laid for her. From that moment the girl was bewitched. Next day her copper pan ran out when she put the milk into it. She sent it to Newbury to be repaired. But the same thing happened three times. In fact, she became in every way so unlucky that she was finally obliged to give up her situation.

As they rush through the villages in their motors, or on their bicycles, how little the majority of people guess, even if they give the matter a passing thought, that many of the cottagers standing at their doors to watch them pass are now—in this twentieth century—really in the same state of culture as were their forefathers when vast forests covered the larger part of the world, centuries before such comparatively modern conveniences as roads were even dreamt of. But so it is.

One thing that has struck me rather forcibly is the influence of character and temperament upon the retention of certain traditions and myths, and the possible rejection of others. This is more marked in some instances than others, but I have seldom failed to notice it to a certain extent. I am thinking at the present moment of two special cases. One was

that of an old woman of a poetical and romantic temperament, who had unusually high ideals about love, which she said was the "greatest power in the world." These ideals have coloured her whole life and given her that vision of moral beauty, in spite of adverse circumstances, which is an essential part of the poetic temperament. This old woman's mind is full of fanciful stories and legends about nature, and picturesque observances and customs. She will tell you quaint love-stories and scraps of old ballads and songs. But all the weird and grim and awful traditions she has suffered to pass altogether; they have not appealed to her.

With the other woman of whom I am thinking it was different; to her they had appealed. She was of that type, if indeed she belonged to any type at all, which I am inclined to doubt, for there was a strange unusualness about old Mary. A reserve and quaint unapproachableness hedged her round. Perhaps it was in this that her attraction lay, or it may have been in something more subtle, even in the subtlety itself. Mary suffered from what she called a "bad indisgestion"; she was seldom out of pain, but her silent fortitude was wonderful; no pious platitudes were ever in her mouth. Her manner of bearing the ills of life suggested a pagan stoicism; her face was in keeping with the thought. There was a strength and self-reliance about it that seemed somehow to belong to a past age. It was a handsome face; the nose was hooked, the eyes, which were dark and piercing, seemed

always to be looking inward, though they could gleam with a fine humour, and light up with pleasure at one's coming. She was always pleased to see one, and liked your sympathy, though she never sought it; it seemed almost an insult to offer it. Salvation must come from within. A man must help himself. One knew somehow that Mary recognised that. "I could never tell you what I feels," she used to say, and she never tried. It was a silent acceptance of a relentless fate.

Mary lived in the almshouses. The almshouses stand upon the brow of a hill, their gardens sloping gently towards the road upon one side, and towards cottage gardens upon the other. Each house has its own patch of ground, separated from the next by a grass path. Each patch possesses an apple-tree—a precious apple-tree. No stocks or shares were ever more eagerly watched than are those apple-trees on Christmas Day. For if the sun shines through their branches on that day it promises, so the old folk say, a plentiful crop of fruit for them in the autumn. Mary lived in the end house of the building, the one with a verandah. You went under it, straight into the room where she was always sitting, by the fire in winter, by the empty fireplace in summer. Just behind her chair stood the tall eight-day clock, with its one gilt hand, and the painted dresser covered with little bits of crockery. "Some on 'em tried to persuade mer not to bring the dresser when I came here," Mary told me; "they said as people don't have them nowadays,

but I couldn't do without ma dresser." Verily the Philistine is always present in the land; one felt thankful that Mary had resisted him.

A talk with her was like taking a step backward into the years long gone by. You felt the atmosphere of them. It seemed to cling round her; when you were with her you were received into it too. In some odd and inexplicable manner the present had been grafted upon her, without in any way touching her personality; that belonged to the past. Old-fashioned was not the term to apply; she was too much of a rounded whole for that. It was more as though some old picture had come to life, and was living over again the life of a bygone civilisation—among modern surroundings, uninfluenced and unaffected by them. But Mary was perfectly aware of the march of time; she was shrewd enough. "They say as each generation gets weaker and wiser," she said to me one day; "'em certainly gets wiser, or 'em couldn't make the things 'em does."

Deep down in Mary's mind, undisturbed by any outward circumstances, remained always those wonderful myths and legends that had been handed down and assimilated by her. I used to come upon them quite unexpectedly sometimes. It was always a moment of excitement with me when I heard a fresh story; and each one she told was a new one: she never repeated herself. Her language reminded me curiously of the diction of the Old Testament, particularly in the witch story, which she prefaced with the assurance,

"We knows as there are such things as witches, 'cos we reads of 'em in the Bible." Mary had no doubt as to their existence.

Two men, a carter and a thatcher, lodged together, ate together, and slept together in the same bed. One day the thatcher said to the carter, "I wonder why it is you look so bad, and so different to me, when we eat and live the same?" The carter said, "You would look bad too if you were rode about every night as I am." A witch used to come every night, and ride him like a horse—ride him about fearful. The thatcher was a "girt" powerful man; he said he would change places with the carter, and sleep his side of the bed. At night the witch came as usual to that side of the bed, and put a bridle in the thatcher's mouth, and rode upon him. Then she took him to the stable, and a lot of others came to put up their horses. The thatcher was so strong, he took off the enchanted bridle and hid under the manger with it. When the witch came in to fetch him, he got out, and put the bridle upon her instead, and rode her to a blacksmith's. He said to the blacksmith, "I want a shoe put on my horse's fore-foot"; then he rode her out and left her. The next day the thatcher went to his work, and his master came out looking very "solitary." The thatcher asked him what was the matter. He said his wife was ill and could not get up. "Make her get up," said the thatcher. The master said he could not. "Then make her put her right hand out of bed." The master said he could not do that either. "Force her to," said

the thatcher, and at last the husband did, and there was a "girt" iron horseshoe upon her hand. The husband said he thought he was married to an honest woman, but he found he was married to the devil; so he had her put out of the way—stifled, or something.

Is not that a wonderful story to be told quietly and in all seriousness in this twentieth century; told, mind you, not as a fairy tale or fable, but as a history of something that really happened? I came out of that dear old woman's cottage, and a motor rushing round a corner nearly knocked me down. When I had recovered from the shock, though not from the irritation, I rubbed my eyes metaphorically, and wondered whether I was dreaming, and which was the dream-world—that in which the motors hoot and dash madly about, or that one where dwelt the simple but shrewd old peasant, and the wonderful witches and wizards with their enchanted bridles? Somehow, old Mary's story had been so graphically told, and the weird atmosphere created by the teller so absorbing, that the world peopled by all these mysterious beings just then seemed to me the more real of the two. Presently, as I walked in the main road, another motor dashed past, and I returned from the realms of magic and mystery to those of the present, and the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and four. Smothered with dust, and half-choked as I was—one always hates a motor unless one happens to be in it—I felt very much inclined to echo the sentiment expressed by the man mending the road, who raised himself from his work

to remark "They things ought to be up in the hedge—anywhere but on the road!" Old Mary's own words came back to me, "They say that each generation gets weaker and wiser; 'em certainly gets wiser, or 'em couldn't make the things 'em does," and I walked on—wondering.

Old Mary's life had been a hard one until she came into the haven of the almshouse. She had been brought up by an aunt, and when a girl used to work in the fields in all weathers for fourpence a day. Much of the pain she suffered when old was the result of bad food, often no food, in her youth. A pathetic little anecdote she once told me gave a glimpse into the privations she had undergone. One day, when she had been turnip-hoeing, she sat down with the other workers at the dinner-hour under a rick to rest—not to eat, for she had brought no food with her—but merely to rest. A young man sitting near her opened his basket—there was his dinner; but he had the quinsy; he looked at the food, tasted it, could not eat it, and shut up the basket and put it away. And Mary was sitting close to him hungry, with a healthy girl's appetite. The pity of it! the memory of that uneaten dinner followed her into the years when she was old.

Mary's stories were so entrancing that once or twice I was guilty of selfishness. I forgot that she was tired, that the gnawing pain was generally there, until upon one occasion she summarily dismissed me. "Now I'll tell you three riddles, and then you must go."

These were Mary's riddles. The first refers to the Gospel story :—

> H. and P.P. so well did agree
> To blot out the name of C.
> But they could not do it without the help of G.
> M. was amazed and grieved to see
> Envy and malice in H. and P.P.

The solution is obvious.

Here is another :—

> Two died as never was born (Adam and Eve).
> Two born as never died (Enoch and Elijah).
> Two spoke as never lied (Christ and Balaam's ass).

The last is more poetical :—

> "I saw six birds all in a cage;
> Each of them had one single wing,
> That they could fly and sweetly sing.
> Their age did not abate their strength,
> Their tails were thirty feet in length."

The answer is the bells in the tower.

Some of the Berkshire stories belong to that stage of culture which gave us the legends of Beauty and the Beast, and the Swan Maiden. The mole, it is said, was once a fine lady, so fine that she was changed into a mole and compelled to walk underground.

I shall not forget my excitement when, sitting over the fire one winter's day with Mary, she told me a

legend which explains and accounts for the words, "The owl was a baker's daughter," uttered by Ophelia in her madness. Shakespeare's familiarity with these orally transmitted legends is well known. This is the story in exactly the words it was told to me.

Our Lord went to a baker's shop to ask for something to eat, and the woman there began baking him a cake. But each time she put a handful of flour into the pan she took some out, saying "Oo-ooh! that's too much—oo-ooh! that's too much." And He said to her, "Owl thou art and owl thou shalt be, and all the birds of earth shall peck at thee." "And if you come to look at the owl," was Mary's comment, "it has more the face of a Christian than a bird." This legend I afterwards discovered is known to Shakespearean commentators, but not in so perfect a form. Be that as it may, it makes no difference to the surprise and delight I experienced that winter afternoon when I was suddenly transported into the sixteenth century, and into who knows what old Pagan times, ages before. The remembrance of such a sensation does not quickly fade away.

I could never determine whether old Mary's dislike of having a photograph or any picture done of her was a remnant of superstition or merely an idiosyncrasy of her own. A lady once, with difficulty, succeeded in painting her portrait. Mary took no interest in it. "Take it away," she said, when it was finished—"take it away; I don't want to see it, I don't want no one to have any picture of me when I'm dead." The fact

that she had no one belonging to her may have prompted the feeling. Her husband had died long years ago, her child when it was seven—she never had another. There was no kith nor kin, near nor distant, to come in for her little possessions. Her dresser, her clock, and little bits of crockery would all go to strangers. She was absolutely alone. Perhaps when she died Mary wished to be forgotten. She never spoke of any possible compensation in a future existence; she never alluded to a future life. Maybe it was more restful to her not to think of one. She struggled through this life silently to the end. "They will come in one morning and find mer dead," she said, "but I tells 'em they needn't be afraid, I shan't do 'em no harm."

It was long before she took to her bed; at last, when so ill she could sit up no longer, she had it brought down into the little sitting-room. One winter morning I went to see her, and found her sitting up painfully having her hair combed by a neighbour—long, thick, luxuriant hair it was, reaching to her waist.

"What beautiful hair you have, Mary," I said.

"Yes," she answered simply, "I allas had a lot of hair."

When I left her that day I knew that I had seen her last smile of welcome and heard the last of her queer stories. There was no more time, the rest must remain for ever unheard.

The next morning she was dead.

CHAPTER X

THE ROD-BEDS

THE stranger who visits Berkshire for the first time in the autumn will be struck by the blaze of red that he will see in the low-lying marshland near the rivers in different parts of the county. Perhaps he has never heard of the rod-beds, but one thing is quite certain—should he happen to possess the eye and the soul of the artist, having once seen them he will wish to see them again and again and again; even then he will probably not be able to appreciate their full beauty. For, as with the fir-woods and the commons, it is only by those who live near them, and see them in every one of Nature's varying moods, that the rod-beds and their beauty can be really understood.

They must be seen under a grey sky, when a damp mist creeps up like a pall from the river, and hangs over them, looking blue and mysterious where it is thickest in the dim light, softening the colour of their brilliant crimson and orange, and blotting out the trees and woods in the distance till they are nothing but a purple blur. Presently, quite suddenly perhaps,

THE ROD-BEDS, MIDGHAM.

[*To face page* 122

a little breeze passes over the fields, and the tall brown grasses waving above the rods shake their feathery heads, and some of their seeds fall and float like thistledown through the mist.

Then again the rod-beds should be seen when a bright sun is shining. The air is crystal clear, and the rods glisten in all their bravery of scarlet and gold, under a turquoise sky. Once more, you should see them in mid-winter, when the little pools of water in between are frozen over. A white powdery frost like diamonds clings to the yellow tussocks of grass which divide the patches of rods here and there, and they shiver with a crisp rustle when the winds sweep over them.

The rod-beds are not only a distinctive feature and ornament of the country; they do more than beautify the landscape. They are a source of income to the inhabitants, though not a very general one, it is true. They are somewhat of a monopoly among the few, and those more or less of a certain class. The men who own and work the rod-beds generally make a fair amount of money; indeed, at one time, some of them are said even to have made fortunes, though those days are probably over now. There is a man living in a cottage—indeed it is hardly worthy of the name of cottage for it is little more than a hovel—who talked to me about the "handfuls of sovereigns" that he used to take home to his wife, in a much more airy manner than most people would talk about handfuls of coppers. And the meaning of it is that in the old days before

the foreign trade stepped in and spoilt the English trade the rods were worth £38 a load, and this man owned several acres of the beds. Had he possessed saving habits, according to his own account, he might have been a millionaire. It is quite possible; fortunes have been made by more unlikely people, and in more unlikely ways. But, as one of his neighbours remarked, this man in the time of his prosperity had "taken his money to the wrong place." Which, being interpreted, does not mean that a bank had broken, or that his investments had failed, but that his gains and riches had found their way to the local beer-shop.

The foreign supply is a very potent reason for the decay of the rod trade. It is done at a cheaper rate than the English, and "made in Germany" has become the hall-mark of a great quantity of rods in the home market. There is considerable irony in the fact that the foreign rod cultivation has been brought to perfection by the importation in other countries of English growers; in this case we have been our own enemies.

In the late autumn the rods are cut. The Belgian ones, or red ones, are the first to go: "they pretty ones," as one of the rod men described them. The other rods, the Common Osier, and the New Kind, which latter is particularly tough and pliable, fall later. The rod-cutting lasts from November to March. It is slow work, for every root or head is taken in the hand and cut separately with a sickle.

But the most picturesque part of all the work

connected with the rod-beds, is the sorting. This is done sometimes by women as well as by men, but by the former not so frequently now; the outdoor work done by women becomes less every year. "They've struck work," said one of the men in the sorting yard; "and a good thing too, for it's too cold for they out 'ere." Doubtless it is; nevertheless the sorting yard loses something in picturesqueness by the absence of the women with the subdued tones of their dresses and the blue or white of their aprons. But even without this addition, it is worth going out of one's way to see a sorting yard. It is a pretty scene.

All round the yard stand great brown stacks of rods. They are the ones that have not been sold in previous years, and are being "held over" until the market is at its best and a good price offered. They form a dark background for the brilliant crimson and orange and yellow, the gorgeous colours of the Belgian rods, that are piled up against them in bundles. When the sun is shining their colour is almost dazzling; in any case it is satisfying. The gradation, from rich crimson at the top to pale gold at the bottom of the rods, cannot be described. You must go to Berkshire and see it for yourself.

The sorting yard is indeed a lesson to the artist in the massing of colour—that massing of colour which is a necessity if the eye is to be gratified. Piled up on one side may be a great heap of the Belgians, a deep note of red. They are the shortest of the rods,

some of their thick little bundles not being more than three feet in height, while the others will reach eight feet, or even ten feet. Then, behind them may be a heap of the New Kind rod—which is quite an old kind now—a mass of delicate nut-brown colour, shading gradually to pale yellow; and again the shining bundles of the Common Osier towering above all the others in height, leading the eye through tones of green and russet to the rich brown of the stacks and thatched sheds. And the human interest and movement needful to make the picture perfect is there also. In the centre of the yard the men are busily at work, untying the rough bundles that have been made up in the field, sorting the rods into bundles of the same length and quality, then tying them up tight again. Not far off, outside the yard, a little stream of water sparkles. There is always water near a sorting yard; if there is no natural stream one has to be made, for the rods that are presently to be stripped of their peel must stand in water to keep them alive. Some of them are already there, thus carrying the eye on to another mass of colour a little farther off.

In May once more the sorting yard becomes a busy scene. Then, when the sap has risen, the rods are taken out of the water, and the bundles untied once more. It is time for the stripping to be done; and in the warm sunshine, women and even children do this work. Not all the rods are stripped. The smaller Belgian ones that are used by market gar-

deners for tying purposes, and some of the Common Osiers that will be made into brown baskets, are left as they are. The stripping machine is a simple contrivance. It is called a "brake"; through it the rod is drawn, coming out, having left its skin behind it, a beautiful creamy-white.

After this the country life of the rods is ended. No more will they feel the cold touch of the white mist in the valley or flush a rosy red under the caress of an autumn sun. Never again will a pheasant hide himself among them, to disturb their stillness presently with the rustle of his wings and his whirring call. Their crimson colour has gone from the landscape. They are borne away from Berkshire, and all its sweet sights and sounds, to London, to Spitalfields, or across the river, through all the noise and bustle and the everlasting roar of the Blackfriars Road, into the Borough. There they are kept by the great wholesale dealers, always soaking in water ready for use, and are sold retail in small or large quantities to the basket-makers. But down in the Kennet valley next year the rod-beds once more will be crimson and gold and russet and green. The rods that are gone will not long be missed; others will soon grow up to take their place, once more reviving in the hearts of those who live near them and love them those memories and associations which autumn after autumn they never fail to bring.

CHAPTER XI

HOOP-CUTTING

EVERY nine years in Berkshire the copses are cut down. This cutting begins in the winter and goes on into early spring. Gradually, instead of the red-brown haze upon some hill or rising ground, an empty space appears, and we feel some of that inevitable sadness that always comes with the felling of trees. It may be some beauty of the country which before was hidden is now opened out, some distant range of hills that we had not seen—perhaps we can even get a better sight of the sunset. We are not reconciled. We miss the soft green curtain that we have watched being hung out there year after year—ever since we can remember, it would almost seem, for nine years is a long period in any life.

It is only later that consolation, and not only consolation, but very adequate compensation—that law of life and nature which Emerson declares to be universal—is realised; by and by, when the spring is here and the sun is shining. One day the brown space looks less brown than before; something seems to be

covering its bareness, something that looks like the shadow of a cloud. We go across to see; it is then that the comfort comes, then that we no longer think regretfully of the filmy green curtain we loved so well. We look across at the distant hills and are glad that they are no longer hidden. Some of their blueness and the blueness of the sky has come down into the little wood. The air is full of the sweet scent of bluebells—

> "Tender bluebells, at whose birth
> The sod scarce heaved."

Primroses, too, are everywhere, amongst the roots of the large trees which are still left standing; in the little ditches which cross the wood here and there, and hiding in clusters underneath the bluebells. We sit down and give ourselves over to the intoxication of the spring—that feeling which is full of a subtle sadness, even when it is most full of hope; which can amount to an inexpressible pain. Then we go home with our hands filled with flowers.

When the time has come for a wood to be cut down, it is sold as it stands to a man who is called a copse-dealer. He undertakes the whole work, and hires the labour. It is for him that the copsemen and hoopmen work. The copsemen are the first to begin; they are the men who cut down the wood, after it has been divided into lots or "drifts" of five acres to each copse-man. They not only cut the trees, but trim them, and make the wood up into bundles to be sold either for

firewood or broom-making, and prepare the rest for the hoopmen to work upon.

And when one talks about the "hoops," it is necessary to explain, for though they are called hoops, and will be hoops in another stage of their existence, they are certainly not hoops in the general acceptation of the word when they leave the copse. Then they are only straight pieces of wood, which presently will be bent into hoops round tubs and barrels, and used to strengthen and bind together boxes and casks. Most of the hoopmen have been at their work all their lives. It looks simple enough—but is it? A closer inspection will show you that it is not so easy as it appears. One old hoopman has been at it for fifty years, and his three sons now work under him. He is quite ready to be communicative and to explain the intricacies of what has become to him an absolutely mechanical performance. Though he cannot be said to be a very lucid exponent of it, he at least makes you understand, which is something. He is a little old man, whose back is bent with ceaseless stooping at his work. He wears a leathern apron, and leathern sleeves over his coat. He suffers from "rheumatics," and acknowledges quite gravely to carrying a piece of alum in his pocket for the complaint. The remedy does not seem to have been a very efficacious one; perhaps his faith in it has not been sufficient.

Upon a day, of which the old man remarks that "it couldn't have bin better if we'd med it oursels," it is pleasant to go into the copse and watch the men at

their work. The sun shines warmly, there is almost a throb of spring in the air, one can almost fancy a faint greenness in the trees; but the cuckoo has not come yet, and March has to be got through. It will be well to make the most of the day, the warmth, and the sun; on the morrow there may be frost, perhaps even snow.

The copse is not all felled yet. Upon two sides of the bare space which has been already cleared a red-brown mass of trees still stands—oaks, and ashes, and alders, with here and there the slim stem of a silver birch; the last will be left there when its humbler companions have been laid low. The copse-men are at work with their bill-hooks, cutting and trimming, and making the wood into bundles. Gradually the space grows. It is covered with the bronze leaves of the year before, out of which project the naked stumps of the trees that have been already cut. Presently they will be hidden by the bluebells. In the centre, in the clearing, surrounded by great heaps of cream-coloured shavings, and the white bundles of finished hoops, the old man stands, patiently measuring and splitting the pieces of wood, as he has done for more than fifty years; and his sons at some little distance off are "sheeving" and finishing them. The arrangement for measuring the wood is primitive enough, yet it might be difficult to contrive a more modern method to answer the purpose better. At regular intervals from each other and the stake upon which the hoops are cut and split, posts are

driven into the ground, so that they just project above it. One end of the piece of wood to be measured is laid against one of the posts, and the other against the stake, and the post which the end of the "hoop" reaches determines its length. The end that is upon the stake is then chopped to make the length exactly right, and with the same tool, a sharp little axe, the piece of wood is split through the middle. It is then thrown upon the proper pile of hoops, and is ready to be planed or shaved. Does it all sound very complicated?—well that, perhaps, is the result of its simplicity.

And then comes the "sheeving," which is accomplished by another simple but effectual contrivance, called a "brake," which is set up by the men themselves in this way: A thick piece of timber, which works upon a pivot, is fastened to three uprights, and weighted at one end with a heavy bundle of faggots, or a block of wood, tied to it by a rope. Crossing this movable piece of wood at the top is a round roll of iron, about a foot in length. The movable piece of wood is worked by the knee being placed against it, the pressure either releasing or holding fast the "hoop" when the end of it is placed under the parallel rod of iron. Whilst it is thus held fast it is quickly sliced thin and smooth, or "sheeved," with a very sharp knife having a handle at both ends. I have heard that a contrivance which bears a resemblance to the "brake" is used in China, but for the truth of this assertion I cannot vouch.

At last the "hoops" are finished and ready for the market. The bundles are made up with their shaved or white side outwards and are bound very neatly and tightly together. In the distance, when they have lately been cut, before the weather has touched them, they gleam like bundles of ivory. In the spring, for a long time, upon the roads and in the lanes, carts with loads of white bundles may be seen. They are on their way to the wharf, where the bundles will be put on the barges to float slowly towards their destination, which is finally London, upon the bosom of the canal.

CHAPTER XII

A ROMANY SETTLEMENT

GOING south-west towards Reading is a well-wooded bit of country, for now you come to the fir-woods. Those beautiful fir-woods! And as with the commons and the rod-beds, so to appreciate the fir-woods and understand them it is necessary to know them at all times and all seasons. In the spring, when the wooded dells upon their edges are thick with primroses, the larches are hanging out pale green tassels, and you get glimpses here and there amongst the straight brown stems of bits of rich colour, made by the dead bronze leaves of the young beeches. Or upon a hot afternoon in summer, when the only sound is the soft cooing of a wood-pigeon, soothing and delicious, you lie upon the soft bed of pine needles; when the sun is glaring hotly outside, and look straight up into the cool dimness of the heavy green canopy made by the tops of the trees. The flies will bother you—there is no denying that; they are always tiresome in the woods. After all, perhaps, there must be something to remind one that nothing upon this earth can be quite, quite

ALDERMASTON WOODS.

[*To face page* 134.

perfect—not even the fir-woods upon a summer afternoon. And they are as perfect as it seems possible. Yet I think the time of their supreme beauty is the autumn, when you wade knee-deep through golden bracken, or walk in paths that are edged thickly on both sides with the glorious fern, and the sun glints through the trees till their resinous trunks are warmed into a beautiful rose-colour, while the atmosphere is bathed in a light that seems hardly earthly in its clear opalescence.

The fir-woods extend for miles in this part of the country, cropping up every now and again all along the south, until you reach its most western limit. The roads, excellent for bicycling in dry weather, all look so much like one another, that the stranger might very well get confused, or even lose himself for a time. The hounds spend hours in these woods in the hunting season; after a fox has got into them there is not much sport to be obtained; the hard rider from the "shires" would think it but poor fun. However, the residents in Berkshire would hasten indignantly to repudiate any imputation concerning their horsemanship, such as Fuller made in a quaint parabolic sentence. The lands of Berkshire, he says, are apt to cast their owners; this he attributes not so much to the unruliness of the beasts as to the unskilfulness of the riders. This remark and the wish which he goes on to express, that the Berkshire gentry may "be better settled in their saddles, so that the sweet places in this country may not be subject to so many mutations,"

seems to be an allusion to the disappearance of the old county families, and the constant changes amongst the new ones.

Here and there, lying at the side of and in between the woods are patches and stretches of common land, which strike one as being ideal places for gipsies; and the gipsies have recognised the fitness also. There is a Romany settlement (these people resent the sobriquet of gipsy) between Brimpton and Aldermaston towards Tadley. At all the feasts and village fairs of the surrounding country there is no more familiar figure than old Betty Hicks, who belongs to this particular settlement; no more familiar and no more quaint one than Betty in her little donkey-cart, a black silk hood bonnet on her head and a short clay pipe in her mouth. Betty is a hawker, or "travelling lady," as she is designated by her people. But travelling days for her are nearly over; both she and the old donkey have pretty nearly come to the end of their tether. The time cannot be so very far ahead when the fairs and the feasts and the roads of South Berkshire will see her well-known figure no more.

Betty is a "character." There are stories told of her drinking propensities. She has often been seen, it is said, lying at the bottom of her little cart, while the old donkey, unguided, makes its way slowly and carefully homewards. Perhaps Betty owes her life to her donkey. For who knows—the stories told about her may be true; perhaps she does drink. She smokes unlimited tobacco and, according to the

opinion of one of her old neighbours, "it isn't the wittels wot kips Betty going, but the 'baccy and the little drap o' drink."

Betty shares with all the people of gipsy blood their extreme reverence for the dead. After her daughter's death, having nursed her devotedly during her last illness, the old mother walked a distance of nearly three miles with the aid of two sticks over frozen ground—it was too slippery to take the donkey—to visit the grave. "There was father, mother, brothers, sisters, and children all lying in the graveyard," she said, with infinite pathos, "and when I got there I don't know how I felt."

Within the memory of the older inhabitants, the people of the settlement to which Betty belongs have lived in tents; then they took to vans; now they reside mostly in houses which they have built themselves, having made a piece of common land their own by buying it, or squatting. Some of the tribe still prefer their vans; these are chiefly those who have kept much to their ancient traditions, and are more exclusive. They all preserve still their own language, though now the children go to the village schools many of their words have become known. But the Romanies will never lose their secretiveness. Persuasion causes them to disclose very little; the mystery shrouding them will never be wholly torn away. The George Borrows and Mr. Lelands are few and far between; and even with them it was "thus far and no farther." The Romany tribes

resent even the kindest and most sympathetic interference with their secrets if it is carried just a little too far. "I don't know what they does; I only know what I does myself," was old Betty's reply to some questions of mine as to their customs which she deemed inquisitive—an answer of which the most skilful diplomatist would have no reason to be ashamed.

I have been told in Berkshire of a weird and dreadful recipe which was given by a gipsy for acquiring the power to injure people. I give it in exactly the words in which I heard it. When you go to the Sacrament do not eat the bread, but carry it away in your hand; go into the churchyard and walk round it three times, saying the Lord's Prayer backwards. Then you will see a great black toad, which is old Satan; give it the bread to eat, and after that you can do anything you wish to people.

The members of the Romany settlement may be met on the roads anywhere in this part of the country; there is no difficulty in knowing them. They are instantly recognisable by their swarthy countenances, strange type of face, and the eyes with the peculiar stare. They are totally different from the type of gipsy with greasy curls frequenting London. The voices of those in Berkshire are soft and gentle, unlike the rough tones of the Berkshire native. Their manners are as courteous and gentle as their voices, so long as you keep good friends with them; they will give you most civil answers should you

FIR-WOODS, NEAR ALDERMASTON.

[*To face page* 138.

happen to make any inquiries respecting the roads or the way you may want to go. By occupation they are chiefly horse-dealers. Dressed in the inevitable black-and-white checked coat, it is a common sight upon market days to see four or five men tightly packed together in a small cart following a drove of ponies which they are driving along the road.

So, content to remain in ignorance of all that they will never tell us, we will leave this curious colony of interesting people with the mysterious origin, and wander on through the fir-woods towards Aldermaston. Here once more we come upon scenes of the Civil War, and are reminded of the struggle between the Royalists and Parliamentarians. In the month of October, 1644, Essex and his army marched through Aldermaston, going on over Bucklebury Heath to fight that great drawn battle, the second battle of Newbury. Aldermaston had divided its favours and given shelter from time to time to the generals of both parties, though the sojourn there of Colonel Gage was shortened in spite of, or rather because of, a ruse he had employed as a safeguard. The Royalists were on their way to Basing House, to the relief of the garrison there, and had marched from Oxford through the lanes and by-roads hoping to reach their destination unobserved. As a precaution against attack, and in order to mislead their enemies, the Royalists were wearing orange-tawny coloured scarves and ribbons, the Parliamentary colours. And so they arrived at Alder-

maston, a village off the high-road, where they considered themselves tolerably safe, and Colonel Gage doubtless hoped for a comfortable night after their long march. But his intentions were frustrated, and the Royalists were caught in their own trap. A party of Charles's horse passing through Aldermaston, in their ardour, quite forgot the disguise which their friends had adopted, and hurriedly attacked them. So the stratagem failed. Gage, instead of remaining until the morning, as he had originally intended, was obliged to leave Aldermaston hastily at eleven o'clock at night; meanwhile, the troops before Basing House had been warned of the approaching danger.

Aldermaston Park was for some generations in the possession of the Congreves. There is a monument in the church to the dramatist Congreve, one of the family, who died in 1729 in Surrey Street, Strand, from an internal injury received when his chariot was overturned at Bath. As he had the reputation for being of an extremely parsimonious character, he was probably not the hero of the quaint local saying having reference to the exploits of one of the owners of the Park at loo: "When clubs are trumps Aldermaston shakes." An incident connected with the Poet Laureate, Nicholas Rowe, is more in keeping with the particular characteristic with which Congreve has been accredited. It did not, as far as I know, actually occur at Aldermaston, though it belonged to the time of the dramatist's residence there. He happened to have in his possession a snuff of some special kind, for which

Rowe had conceived a great fancy, and was always sending his box to be replenished at Congreve's expense. Too often apparently for the latter's taste; and at last he determined to administer a gentle reproof. When the coveted snuff was sent to Rowe, in the lid of the box had been inscribed the two Greek letters Φ ! P. It was really not a bad joke, though the critic Dennis, when the incident was afterwards related to him, did remark a little unfairly that the man who was capable of making so vile a pun would not hesitate to pick pockets.

Congreve's weaknesses and peccadilloes received severe handling by another man of letters. Voltaire happened to have an immense admiration for the works of the dramatist, but the latter on their first meeting alluded to his plays as trifles that were beneath Voltaire, and hinted, with a show of mock modesty which annoyed the cynic, that he desired to be visited on no other footing than upon that of a gentleman who led a life of plainness and simplicity. Whereupon Voltaire, with crushing sarcasm, replied that had Congreve been so unfortunate as to be a mere gentleman he would never have come to see him at all, and that he was very much disgusted at so unreasonable a piece of vanity. The remark seems to have been in some measure justifiable. The dramatist had not lacked admirers. The poet Dryden, amongst others, had added his quota of praise, writing of Congreve's first play that he had "never seen such a first play in his life."

CHAPTER XIII

BUCKLEBURY

IN the year 1540, John Winchcombe, the son of the famous clothier, Jack of Newbury, was granted an estate, which had been lost to the monastery of Redyng by the attainder of Hugh Cooke, the last Abbot. This takes us to Bucklebury, or Bakylbury, as it is called in the grant of 1540, where the said John Winchcombe built himself a house. This house, a fine Tudor mansion, was erected on the site, it is thought, of a former residence of the Abbot of Redyng; for when the Winchcombe house was burnt down in 1840, some carved arches of more ancient date, as well as some tesselated pavements, were found. At the same time a subterranean passage was discovered, through which it is possible Lord Bolingbroke made his escape after his attainder.

Bolingbroke was much at Bucklebury, for he had inherited the property through his wife Frances, who was daughter of Sir Henry Winchcombe, the second baronet. Probably Bucklebury at this time became more known to the world in general. Up and down

FISHPOND, BUCKLEBURY.

[*To face page* 142.

the grass paths by the old fishponds behind the house, where now the swans strut in solitude, Mr. Secretary St. John must have walked often with his friends Pope, Gay, and Swift. Of the visit of the last there is written record in his letter to Stella, from Windsor, August 2, 1711: "I go to-morrow with the Secretary to his house at Bucklebury, twenty-five miles hence, and return early on Sunday morning." Again, on August 3rd, the Dean writes: "I go this day at noon, as I told you, to Bucklebury. We dine at 12, and expect to be there in four hours." In the anticipated four hours the journey was accomplished, and Swift, having remained two nights with his friend, proceeds to give a description of him in his rôle of "a perfect country gentleman." Mr. Secretary smoked tobacco with one or two neighbours; he inquired after the wheat in such a field; he went to visit his hounds, and knew all their names. The daily paper does not come into the programme, and there was no delivery of letters twice a day, otherwise Mr. Secretary's life was filled up during his sojourn at Bucklebury much in the same way as is the life of a man in the twentieth century in the same capacity. And when night came, "just in the country fashion," his host and hostess showed the Dean to his bedroom. Life in a country house, even at the beginning of the eighteenth century, was conducted in a more easy, friendly, unceremonious manner than was life in London. Relaxation even then was welcomed.

The Dean was occupied during one of his visits

to Bucklebury in endeavouring to heal the quarrel between Lord Bolingbroke and the latter's former friend, Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. His efforts were unsuccessful, for Bolingbroke, bent upon power, desired the downfall of every one who stood in the way of it. His own downfall followed quickly, and he exclaimed, in disappointment at the failure of his ambitious hopes, "What a world is this, and how fortune does banter us!"

Bucklebury must often have been the scene of searchings of heart. Other troubles besides political ones were suffered and hidden there.

When she came down to dinner and he saw her for the first time, Parnell stared at the beautiful Lady Bolingbroke as though she were a goddess; yet she must often have paced those grass paths up and down by the fishponds and walked in the walled garden in sad solitariness after her desertion by Bolingbroke in the spring of 1715, and during the two years that followed before she died. Her ghost is said to have haunted the place—a white lady in a chariot drawn by black horses. This legend is evidence that whatever doubts as to the fact of her domestic unhappiness may have been cast by biographers, there were none in the minds of the people of the place in her own time. The old people of the village still tell the tale; some of them lay claim to having seen the ghost, though they say that it never appears now.

The Bucklebury property, after Lady Bolingbroke's death, still descended in the female line. In 1830 it

was in the possession of the Rev. W. H. Howard, and it was in his time that the machinery riots took place. Sad times those were when, soon after the accession of William IV., some of the ringleaders in the riots, men of good character, were transported, three of them even being sentenced to death at Reading. Many of those who were transported afterwards became successful in the colonies, thus proving their desire and willingness to work and support their families, the chance being given them. The riots were caused by the increased employment of machinery: a terrible calamity it was considered; and so it was, doubtless, at the time, for the innovation threw many of the country people out of work, causing great distress. The feeling against it was particularly strong at Bucklebury. The sufferers rose, and went in a body from farm to farm, wreaking their vengeance on the machines and demanding employment and two shillings a day wages. One farmer who had incurred their anger only just managed to escape with his life.

The Squire of Bucklebury was held in high estimation by all the people of the place, and upon his help the men placed their hopes. They all went to the Manor House, and the Squire came out and talked to them, and used his influence to try to persuade them to go home quietly. "Be good men—be good men," he begged them repeatedly. Beer brought in pailfuls was ladled out with a cup, and given to them, with plentiful additions of bread and cheese. The Squire

promised them work and the wages that they demanded. But a discontented mob is not so easily pacified or broken up. Instead of listening and trusting to the promises, and dispersing quietly, as the Squire had asked, the men soon began fighting amongst themselves. Strengthened, and no doubt excited by the kindly, though perhaps not altogether judicious hospitality, they marched on through the villages, fighting and destroying as they went. Nor did the effects of the riot end with that day. The spirit of discontent and rebellion was abroad. Stringent measures were necessary to restore quiet, as well as to prevent serious damage being done. Special constables were sworn in, and during the whole of that winter the farmers took it in turns to parade the villages in couples at night in order to prevent incendiarism.

But seventy-five years have passed since then. Things have changed. Now the difficulty in the country is generally, not so much that men are out of work, but that agricultural labourers of any kind are hard to obtain. The farmers complain that it is almost impossible to get shepherds or "foggers," as the men who look after the cattle are called. The exodus of the younger men to the towns is universal; the dislike felt for working on the land increases, and the ranks of the unemployed in the towns increase also. Someone lately suggested a motive for the exodus from the country, which was that as all the girls and young women go to the towns the young men, finding it dull, are constrained to follow them. I mentioned this idea

THE OLD HOUSE, BUCKLEBURY.

[*To face page* 146.

the other day to a shrewd and particularly intelligent old North Berkshire countryman, who was speaking about the depopulation of the villages, asking him for his opinion of it. He laughed somewhat derisively, and said there were "plenty of girls and to spare" about there. He took a more practical view of the matter. "If the wages were better," he said, "the men would stay on the land." He himself was quite aware of the compensations—that if the wages are higher in the towns, so also are the rents and the expenses generally.

The truth is that to this question, as to most questions, there is not one answer only, but many. The action of those who leave the country for the towns is prompted by no single motive. Sentimental as well as practical ones may come in. Is it not possible also that their course of action may be actuated by another motive, of whose presence the actors themselves never dream? May it not be that, as intelligence wakens, it needs stimulus—the stimulus of competition and movement, something for the mind to work upon, which it fails to find in the country; and that only the undeveloped or the fully developed intellect is content to be with nature?

At Bucklebury there have been other changes since those days of the machinery riots. The old house is now no more. Nothing remains of it but the great kitchen, with its wide open fireplace, the laundries, and a small portion of the back of the house. That curious atmosphere of silence, and underlying vibration

of a life that is past, which hangs over the forsaken habitations of man, pervades the place.

To the south of the ruins of the old house, and not far from it, lies Bucklebury Common, another of the great commons of Berkshire, and one of the most picturesque, surely, in England. Its character is totally different from that of Crookham. It is well wooded; the march of the seasons upon Bucklebury Common is a procession of beauty. In the spring, when the birch-trees are coming into leaf, their young green stands out against a dark background of huge holly trees. The holly-trees are a great feature of Bucklebury Common. Presently, as far as the eye can reach, the gorse is yellow, and the heather flushes a warm pink under the summer sun. Later still there is golden bracken. Long trails of red climb over the bramble-bushes, and the leaves of the great trees rustle down and form a bronze-coloured carpet upon the pathways. Then comes the winter, and the common is silent in a solemn harmony of purple and brown and grey. The wind makes mournful music, and the heavy clouds pile themselves up over the desolate groups of fir-trees. Bucklebury Common is weirdly beautiful in winter.

In a specially wooded part, only to be found by those who know where to look for it, is a great pond. There you can sit for hours and hear no human sound. The cooing of the wood-pigeon or the cry of the dabchick, as it dives in and out among the water-weeds, or an occasional whirr of a pheasant close by may be heard.

BUCKLEBURY COMMON.

Nothing else breaks the eternal quiet. All round the pond the trees bend over their own reflections until they sadly and silently efface them with their leaves.

Some parts of the common have been scenes of industry in past days; a remnant of this industry still remains. Hidden away in a corner, an interesting labour is still carried on, the finished specimens of which you are no doubt familiar with in the shop windows of Bond Street or Regent Street. I mean the wooden soap bowls; ordinary and common objects enough—you have never noticed them with any special interest. But after you have seen them made upon Bucklebury Common you will look at them with different eyes. They are made in all sizes: the smaller are used as cash bowls; some very large ones are in use at the Mint. Many of those in the shops, it is true, are now machine-made; this of necessity, because the people who can still make them by hand have mostly died out. Fifty or a hundred years ago there were numbers of families engaged in the bowl-cutting industry on the common, while now only one family is left in which the art has been preserved. None of the younger people learn; it seems such a pity. This family is justly proud of its bowl-cutting; it has been doing it for generations. The father of the old man who still works at it used to take his bowls by road all the way to London in his cart, starting before sunrise, and sleeping one night in the city. A terrible place he thought it, and glad enough he was to get back to Bucklebury.

Linger for half an hour and ask leave to watch the work, it will well repay you. The bowls are cut out from a huge rough block of wood upon a home-made lathe—many of the tools also are of home manufacture. Here lies so much of the charm. The work is solid, good, and lasting, as only hand-made work can be. The subtle impress of personality is there also, the *caractère* hardly recognised by the English, but thought so much of and appreciated by the French, and up to the present time also by the Japanese.

Many an interesting talk have I had, and many are the stories that have been told me by a certain old rustic who lives in a place called Paradise, in this part of Berkshire. In summer the spot may well deserve its name, but in winter, when it can only be reached by going down a lane ankle-deep in mud, or across some fields where there is no footpath, it might possibly strike you as a poor sort of Paradise; but old John is always happy, always greets you with a smile. The house, which was originally a farmhouse, is built in the most odd and irregular manner, and is now divided into three or four cottages. The end of the house where he lives with his wife has a gabled roof, and is three stories high, an unusual thing in this part of the county. The rest of the house is built in two stories; part of it is thatched. The farm was once surrounded by outbuildings which have fallen into decay and been removed. Old John's wife's relations lived in the same cottage, in which she and her husband now live, before she was born. The

last farmer who had the farm committed suicide by cutting his throat in the room in which the old couple now sleep. They have spoken to me about a stain on the boards—it does not appear to trouble them; though they have many superstitions, about this particular event they have evidently none.

Old John is a picturesque figure, in the brown corduroys that have taken the place, alas! of the smock frock. He wears a soft grey felt hat, turned up in front; below it is his long white hair. A merry twinkle animates his light blue eyes as he leans forward with both hands upon his stick. "I recklet, I recklet," he reiterates as preface to story following story. He has done many things in his time. In his day people did not mind making themselves generally useful, and thought no scorn to turn their hand to any work. He began when he was a "little nipper" of seven, to earn his shilling a week by looking after horses, when he was so tiny that he had to climb into the manger to tie the animals up. So he has had only a fortnight's schooling in his life, but, as often happens, his natural shrewdness and observation have taught him a great deal, more perhaps than any book-learning ever would. Among his accomplishments was included that of being able to sow a field of ten acres with a gallon of "turmut seed," which, though it may be no proof of skill to your mind or to mine, to the initiated stands as a tremendous feat. "They don't know how to sow nowadays—leastways, not with small grain; the larger is easier to manage." His experience of life has

not been confined altogether to Bucklebury; the old man has travelled. He has been to London several times, stayed for a month at a time, and thoroughly enjoyed it. He has visited the National Gallery (his daughter's husband being one of the officials). "There *were* some picturs there," he said, which simple comment, after all, shows an appreciation sadly lacking amongst many people boasting of education, judging by the remarks overheard occasionally in the galleries.

John and his wife are great herbalists, and supply a herb doctor in London with numerous medicinal plants. They recommend tansy tea for rheumatism, marsh mallow poultices for wounds, and white lily root ointment for gatherings. But the herbs by which they set most store are wood sage and horehound. These are wonderful plants, capable apparently of curing almost every ill under the sun indiscriminately. Virtue undoubtedly there is in all these simple remedies. It is a pity that their value has been so much lost sight of.

More doubt may possibly be felt as to the efficacy of the treatment for warts suggested by the old couple. "Werts" might be cured, they said, by cutting slits in a stick of alder, or by making holes according to their number in walnut leaves. The walnut leaves—and this is very important—must then be buried secretly or put down a well. As the leaves decay the warts will disappear. We may scoff at this as foolishness, but, after all, may not these cures be classified with those of faith-healing?

Old John's father was a Berkshire man; he himself was born in Kent, his father having migrated to Romney and become a successful smuggler. Upon one eventful night, with the aid of his men, the latter had landed and taken to his house a cargo of fifty-six casks of spirits, hiding them under the stairs, which had been taken up for the purpose. A short time afterwards he was seized and taken to London, and tried before the King's Bench. He could only surmise that one of his own men had betrayed him, otherwise he would never have been found out. Be that as it may, he was tried and made debtor to the King for the sum of £50. The rest of his adventures are strangely reminiscent of Dickens and "Little Dorrit." For as he could not pay the debt, he and his wife and family were all lodged in the Fleet prison. There they seem to have spent a most comfortable and pleasant eighteen months. The prison was full at the time, and the man made quite a good thing out of waiting upon the gentlemen inmates and cleaning their boots, while his wife did their washing. The yard of the prison was described by my old friend as being "like a little town," though, as he was only four years old at the time of his sojourn there, he cannot remember it himself, and his knowledge was due to the vivid description given him afterwards by his parents. His mother appears to have been so well content with her quarters in the Fleet that she shed tears at leaving it. Her feelings, however, were not universally shared by the other inmates, for one gentleman remarked when he saw her grief,

"You cry because you've got to go, while I cry because I've got to stay." The old Berkshire rustic graphically described the "sorter post-office" with the words upon it outside, "Please remember the poor debtor with no allowance." Inside this box the prisoners took it in turns to sit to receive the money dropped in through the slit by the rich and benevolent, or by the friends of the prisoners. All this is an old story; you have heard and read it often before, but I am telling it to you again, just as I heard it straight from the lips of my old friend, because I think adventures related by those who have actually experienced them are always interesting hearing; besides, each one tells his story differently.

And the Fleet prison has long ago disappeared; so one after another we trace the disappearance of old buildings, the dying out of old customs—some that we consider cruel, some picturesque; many that we are obliged to acknowledge at present as inexplicable; many of them we call foolish; and yet—

> "We think our fathers fools, so wise we grow;
> No doubt our wiser sons will think us so."

We are indeed beginning to hesitate now before we dub old customs as altogether meaningless, and to find out that there is often more in them than we have hitherto fancied. We are beginning to treat them more seriously, and to pause before we condemn these ancient beliefs to the rubbish heap; we are

even beginning to wonder whether much that we have supposed to be superstition, without any foundation whatever in fact, is really so.

A quaint old custom which has gone the way of others was beating the bounds, or drawing the boundaries. It was carried out annually during Rogation week. Its object was apparently to define the landmarks and the boundaries of each parish; but in common with so many of these ancient customs, it was mixed up and associated with all kinds of religious ceremonies. With the procession of villagers walked priests in surplices with banners and crosses; prayers were said, crosses were formed upon the ground, blessings were asked upon the fruits of the earth. The steward of the manor walked first, looking very important and carrying a large banner, and with him were all the influential men of the parish. Every now and then the procession came to a standstill, and the 104th Psalm was read, and sentences having reference to the removal of the neighbour's landmark. That service, in which those who go to church upon Ash Wednesday are invited to acquiesce in calling down curses upon the head of him who does this last-named dreadful thing is perhaps a survival, having connection with the ancient custom of beating the bounds. Gradually the religious part of the ceremony was dropped, chiefly at the Reformation, for much of it was considered Popish. Queen Elizabeth, however, approved of the church-going, and ordered that to be continued. Finally, that also came to an

end; then all that was left was the procession, a purely secular performance.

Bucklebury is a straggling parish, and when the curious and ancient ceremony was practised there it took days to go all round the parish. For no skimping was allowed, every inch of boundary had to be gone over, even when the line went through the baker's oven. In order to give them a knowledge of the boundaries of their parish all the small boys were made to go round them, for what special gain it is difficult to understand. It meant a holiday, at any rate, from work, if not from school, for school was finished early in those days. To effectually impress the knowledge upon the youthful minds, at particular places, measures most unpleasant for the victims were taken. The unfortunate boys were bumped against walls or posts. The teaching can certainly never have been forgotten by one unhappy boy to his dying day, for he was bumped so roughly that one of his arms was broken. Occasionally, however, the gentle art of persuasion was resorted to, and perhaps found to be more effectual. At one place the boundary ran through the mill-stream, and after some of the water had been let off, apples and oranges were thrown into it in order to induce the boys to go across.

The parish boundaries now are only traced upon the map, and in the opinion of one of my ancient village friends the map is not always reliable.

There is a true savour of the countryside, and the

quaint humour one comes across so often, in the story of the funeral procession that used at one time to haunt Bucklebury. This apparition was laid long ago, but not before all the neighbourhood had been well scared by its appearance. The terror had lasted for a considerable time before one of the villagers—more courageous apparently than all the rest—rose in protest. He declared, and his declaration proved to be no empty boast, that he "did not care for ghostesses"; on the contrary, he would like to see one. So, as good as his word, one evening, taking a huge bludgeon in his hand, he sallied forth, took up his position at a convenient spot, and waited for the procession to pass. Soon—too soon, one would think, surely, for any but this courageous mortal—it came into view. There were the ghostly bearers, all in white, moving slowly along, carrying between them their ghostly burden. There had been no exaggeration or fiction in the tale of horror. It was indeed a sight to appal the stoutest heart. But not that of our village hero, he did not flinch, he cared nothing for "ghostesses." Hurling his heavy bludgeon to right and left, and all around, he rushed boldly into the middle of the funeral procession. The bludgeon did deadly work. Strange to say, it did not go right through the transparent bodies of the spirit-bearers of the bier as one would have expected, nevertheless they quickly disappeared into the darkness. The corpse did not disappear with them; it was left lying in the middle of the road.

When the Bucklebury hero with wonderful courage went near, and stooped down and examined it, it proved to be a somewhat substantial ghost. It was no spirit corpse, but the heavy woolly body of a fine fat sheep. The now invisible bearers had been sheep-stealers clad in smocks.

CHAPTER XIV

BERKSHIRE REVELS

YOU will remember that Bengy, the faithful old servant of the Browns, who, before his schooldays, and during his holidays, was so often the companion of Tom's rambles, and initiated his young master into so many secrets, introduced him also to the delights of a country wake or "veast."

A century ago, in many parts of England these fairs used to be held with sports and pastimes. They had nothing to do with the common "statute feasts," being much more ancient. They were held annually, and are evidently connected with the feast of the dedication of the church, having probably been adapted and adopted from much earlier Pagan rites. For Pope Gregory wrote to Melitus, a British abbot, saying whereas the people were accustomed to sacrifice many oxen in honour of dæmons, they should rather celebrate a religious and solemn festival, and not slay the animals *diabolo* (to the devil), but they were to be eaten by themselves *ad laudem Dei* (to the praise of God). So these

feasts were held upon the day of the dedication of the church in each place, the birthday of the particular saint whose relics were deposited there. The people were ordered to make booths and tents with the boughs of trees in the churchyard, and there to celebrate the feast with thanksgiving and prayer. Very naturally abuses soon crept in. There were undesirable accompaniments to the thanksgiving and prayer. In the tenth century a reproof was given in one of the canons established by King Edgar. Those who came to the wake were ordered to pray devoutly, and not betake themselves to drunkenness and debauchery. A vain command apparently, for by degrees the religious wake became a secular fair, till at last the feasts had so deviated from the original design that any idea of religious origin would have seemed absurd, and to many people impossible.

The fairs were still always held upon the feast of dedication, or on a day as near to it as feasible; this was the only remaining element of any connection with the church.

A better guide to a village "veast" could not have been found than Tom Brown's old Bengy, for he had been a famous backswordsman in his young days, and a good "wrestler at elbow and collar." He was distinguished for his prowess in all athletic games, coming of a family that was likewise distinguished. Bengy had won renown as an old gamester against the picked men of Wilts and Somersetshire at many a good bout at the revels and pastimes of the country-

side. And these revels and pastimes formed the chief feature of the "veasts."

So the old man, arrayed in a long blue coat with brass buttons, and a pair of ancient yellow buckskins which he had cleaned for, and inherited from Tom's grandfather, a stout stick in his hand, and a nosegay of pinks and lavender in his buttonhole, escorted his young master to the "veast." Together they walked down the long rows of booths, all fascinating in their way, the old man pointing out to the delighted boy one attraction after another. There were the booths where cherries were sold, and toys, and all sorts of joys; there was another where the tempting fare of gammon of bacon and beans was displayed, all smoking hot, with plates provided to eat it upon. There were the dancing booths with boarded floors, where, upon the payment of a small sum, the young men and girls could dance to the music of fiddle, tambourine, and harp.

A picturesque sight these village fairs must have been—the women dressed in the long scarlet cloaks which were frequently an heirloom descended from mother to daughter, for materials were good and expensive and long-wearing in those days, accompanied by the men in their clean, elaborately worked smock frocks, or their velveteen or fustian coats, and their rough plush waistcoats of many bright colours. Then there were the wagons and the cart-horses standing near, dressed up with ribbons, and the green trees, and the thatched cottages scattered here and there round about.

Much courtship was dependent upon the fairs; the success or failure of her swain in the feats of strength and trials of skill turned the scales of many a maid's decision. The village revel had a great effect upon the matrimonial prospects of Hodge. The anguish of the young man whose head had just been broken in a ring of cudgel players was greatly increased by the remark concerning him of one of the bystanders, that he questioned now if Black Kate would marry him these three years; while Tom Short behaved himself so well in a football match that it was deemed impossible that he should remain a bachelor till the next wake. There is something healthy in the desire that these sports awakened in the breast of the village youth to acquit himself well in the eyes of the young women, and something good also, though the opportunity afforded for distinction was not perhaps all that could be desired.

There must have been searchings of heart, too, over these sports and pastimes. The country girl posted on an eminence watching her sweetheart, a person of small stature, wrestling with a huge, brawny fellow, who twisted and shook him violently, must have been in great anxiety. No wonder she was making odd grimaces, and writhing and distorting her whole body in a strange manner. Like Celia upon a like occasion, she could have wished herself invisible, "to catch the strong fellow by the leg."

But perhaps the chief feature, and the most exciting one of the revels, was the backswording. Each village

had its champion. The game was played with thick sticks, having a basket upon one end to protect the hand. A wooden stage, or platform, was erected and enclosed by a rope. The lookers-on stood round, those at the back mounted up in carts and wagons to raise them above those in front. Any one wishing to take part in the game threw his hat into the ring as a challenge. When a head was won there were loud cheers and shouts of "Here's another old gamester!" An "old gamester" was one who had won a final prize; a "young gamester" one who had as yet broken no heads. A head was counted to be broken when the skin of one of the players had been broken somewhere above the eyebrow, and the blood had run down an inch, or when one of the opponents was tired out.

"Why, Harry, tho'dst broke his yead second bout, man, surely," said a comrade to one of the Berkshire men who had finally beaten one of the men of Somersetshire—who, by the way, seem to have been special adepts and champions at backswording. "No," returned the Berkshire champion, "you see, mates, there's no cumulation of blood belongs to they cider-drinking chaps, as there does to us as drinks beer. Besides, they drinks vinegar allas for a week before playing, which dries up most of the blood as they has got, so it takes a 'mazin' lot of cloutin' to break their yeads as should be."

The prize for this "'mazin' lot of cloutin'" when accomplished was a curious one, more enduring, certainly, than the laurel wreath of the Olympic

games, but still of the nature of a crown. It was a tall silver-laced hat. This prize of a hat was, indeed, the prize for all the games at the village revels. They were sometimes given by the squire of the parish, who, as well as the beaver hat, would occasionally give an additional prize of a hogshead of beer—but this extra prize was only an occasional one. The hats were generally considered sufficient reward. They were as much prized and sought after as any Greek laurels. Should there happen to be a man at the revels who seemed to carry an air of importance in his looks and you asked who he was, your very question would proclaim yourself unknown to the countryside. There would be pride in the answer, showing that the man did not so value himself for nothing. He and his ancestors had won so many hats that his cottage looked like a haberdasher's shop. What was the origin of this strange prize, and what has become of all these treasured hats? One wonders.

These fairs or revels were held in many parts of Berkshire; even as lately as sixty-five years ago there was a large one held at a place called Chapel Row, near Bucklebury. The racecourse where the farmer's cart-horse show took place during this "veast" can still be seen. And there was an old man still living, three or four years ago, upon Bucklebury Common, who was bent nearly double, and could just manage to hobble into his garden with the aid of two sticks; this old man held the proud position of having engaged in backswording with the champion of all

England, who came from Somersetshire to attend Chapel Row revel—Simon Stowe, the old man called him; he was evidently the Simon Stone mentioned by Mr. Hughes, already alluded to elsewhere. The old Berkshire rustic had no expectation, he modestly declared, of victory over the champion; he only engaged in the game for the sake of sport, and to give Stone another head. The old fellow was a sportsman to the backbone. His eyes lighted up with enthusiasm as he talked of his adventure in the game. To judge by his account, backswording was not always unalloyed fun; certainly not when a man got his arm beaten till it "wur like a piece o' liver," and so bruised that he could not go to work all harvest-time.

But, gradually, in common with all the rest of the village feasts, Chapel Row revel dwindled away, till finally it has disappeared altogether. The more quietly disposed people of the places where the feasts were held were glad, no doubt, though Mr. Thomas Hughes, who knew a good deal about Berkshire revels, declares that they were humanising and Christian in spite of the drinking in the evening. He doubtless thought that if people were so inclined they would drink and do wrong in different ways, whether there were revels or whether there were not. His opinion coincided with that of an old rustic, who remembered these "veasts," and who sagely and tersely, and with some degree of truth, remarked that "there's no harm in nothink; it's only folks as makes it so." Folks doubtless very often did "make it so" upon the occasion of the revels, for

another old inhabitant, in telling me about the revels in their flourishing days, declared that if you walked through one in the evening you would see "more drunk nor sober, and people fighting together all the way along." But, then, even Mr. Thomas Hughes does not deny the drinking in the evening. Like everything else, the revels had their good side as well as their bad one, and their advantages as well as their drawbacks. They were always a thorn in the flesh of the clergy, one of whom used to preach a yearly sermon at the time of the feast upon the subject of "drunkenness and revellings," with special emphasis upon the "revellings."

The revels usually lasted for three days. The last evening comes, and "William and Rachel in her new ribbons and many another good lad and lass don't come away just yet, but have a step out, and enjoy it, and get no harm thereby. Yet we, being sober folk, will just stroll away up through the churchyard, and by the old yew-tree, and get a quiet dish of tea, and a parle with our gossips as the steady ones of our village do, and so to bed." Then the fun for all was over at last—

> "The morn appears when all is o'er,
> And all return to labour as before."

Good or bad, whichever they were and whatever their effect upon the villagers, the village revels have all finally come to an end. They dwindled at first, perhaps, because the squire and the gentlefolks of the neighbourhood ceased to attend or take an interest

in them. The village people themselves gradually lost enthusiasm in them, and when enthusiasm in anything has gone, it is often time to discontinue it. They are over and done with. The smock frocks have gone and the pretty scarlet cloaks, and the sun-bonnets, and the dame schools, and the revels have gone too. The old "veast" is no longer the healthy, sound, natural expression of English country life and English country holiday-making; we have got beyond all this, and some better substitute for it must be found. And though they may not recognise the necessity for any substitute, the village people themselves feel that the time for the revels has passed; they have outgrown the rough and sometimes brutal amusement of the "veast." Even the old men and women, who in their youth enjoyed and took part in the backswording, are of the same opinion. The universal sentiment is that it is a good thing it is discontinued. "You don't want to see their dear flesh cut about like that; there's enuf real fighting and trouble in the world without that," an old Berkshire woman quaintly declared. "Men have grown wiser now," was the verdict of an old man.

But "Don't let reformers," says that man of large sympathies, of experience gained by close contact with the country people, and knowledge of human life as expressed in the countryside; "don't let reformers think that they are going really to lay hold of the working boys and young men of England by any educational grapnel which hasn't some *bonâ-fide*

equivalent for the games of the old country 'veast,' something to try the muscles of men's bodies and the endurance of their hearts." Mr. Hughes was no sentimental reformer; he knew what he was talking about. The groups of limp and undeveloped lads and young men who congregate, doing nothing, except joining in possibly unprofitable conversation, wherever the gathering-place may be, on Sunday or a holiday, in the little country towns and villages, are an illustration of the truth of what he says. The movement for the education of the body as well as the mind is gaining ground. People are beginning to realise that a healthy, well-developed body, and a healthy, well-developed mind have much to do with one another, and that the absolute balance of the two is the ideal of perfection.

CHAPTER XV

ODDS AND ENDS OF BERKSHIRE LORE

BERKSHIRE, says Fuller, the old chronicler of the county, is not rich in proverbs; it only possesses one, that one owing its origin to the character of the turncoat Vicar of the time of James I., "The Vicar of Bray will be the Vicar of Bray still." But if Berkshire has not many proverbs it has plenty of sayings doing duty for them. Many of them have reference to the all-important weather, others to the seasons:—

"A wet Good Friday and Easter Day,
A lot of good grass, and a little good hay."

"A dark Michaelmas, and a light Christmas."

"Wash on Ash Wednesday, and you wash someone out of the family."

"Blessed is the woman who bakes on Good Friday and five Fridays afterwards; but cursed is the woman who washes on Good Friday and five Fridays afterwards."

Though dating probably from pagan times, a Christian story is given as the explanation of this last saying.

Our Lord, the legend says, was going to be crucified. He went to a woman's house to ask for succour. She was washing and threw soapsuds at Him; then He went to another woman's house. She was baking and gave Him a cake. He cursed in the one case, and blessed in the other.

Other superstitions there are connected with Good Friday. The Berkshire people declare that if you set a bucket of yeast on that day, you will see a cross "athert" it, as upon hot-cross buns. A loaf baked upon Good Friday is said never to go "ropy" or mouldy; when it is grated it is believed to be good for the whooping-cough. This belief coincides with the former story as to the benefits accruing to those who bake upon this particular day.

There is much latent poetry and picturesqueness in some of the customs practised in bygone years in Berkshire, particularly those coming under the head of divination. Young girls used to stick the stalks of the pink flowers called "mid-summer men and maidens" into a crack in the wall, and the coming together or moving apart of the flowers by the morning signified the truth or the falseness of the absent lover. Out in the hayfields the Berkshire girls were wont to practise another divination. A turf, a bowl of water, and a bough were placed in a row. The girls crawled blindfolded along the grass to touch one of them. Touching the turf meant death, the bowl of water a christening, and the bough widowhood. There was the old-fashioned test for courtship with the Bible and

the key; the key was placed inside the Bible, which was bound round with a garter, the projecting ring of the key held between the finger and thumb of both hands while the words from chapter viii., verses 6 and 7, of the ancient love song, the Song of Solomon, were repeated. The same test was used to find out a thief, only using instead the words from Ruth iv. 4, "And I thought to advertise thee, saying, Buy it before the inhabitants, and before the elders of my people. If thou wilt redeem it, redeem it: but if thou wilt not redeem it, then tell me, that I may know: for there is none to redeem beside thee; and I am after thee. And he said, I will redeem it." Then the name of the suspected thief was mentioned. If he were guilty the key was supposed to turn right round and cause the Bible to fall to the ground.

Upon the outskirts of one of the South Berkshire villages there is a beautiful spot. You stand upon rising ground with the common rising up in undulations upon the other side. Against the sky-line, as far as you can see, lie range upon range of hills; behind, dim and mysterious, are the fir-woods. A long row of cottages is built just beneath the brow of the hill; their chimneys as you stand there are just on a level with your feet. These cottages have been built in some cases by the inhabitants themselves, but generally by their fathers and grandfathers. One of them has great yew-trees in front of it, cut into peacocks and other quaint shapes. It faces south, and the old woman who lived in it used to know the time of day from the

shadow cast by the angle of her door upon the red brick floor of her kitchen. Like the sun-dial, this primitive and poetical clock only told the sunny hours. Mrs. Wilkins belonged to a rather superior family, and was the possessor of all kinds of treasures—samplers and bits of china. One day she brought out to show me something that she laid great store by—two old broadsides. They were kept carefully in the family Bible, and were both copies of the Apocryphal Letter of Agbarus of Edessa; she called them Saviour's Letters. They had been used as charms against illness, especially in childbirth, by her mother and grandmother, who pinned them inside their dresses upon these occasions. I had heard of instances of such broadsides being used in Berkshire; now and then mention had been made of "Saviour's Letters," but I had never been able to find out what they were. These are the only ones I have discovered still in existence; even the oldest inhabitants can only just remember their parents and grandparents using them.*

* The letter was said to be a copy of one written by our Blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and found eighteen miles from Iconium, fifty-three years after our Blessed Saviour's crucifixion. It had been found originally under a stone, round and large, at the foot of the Cross. Upon the stone was engraven, "Blessed is he that shall turn me over." All people that saw it prayed to God earnestly, and desired that He would make the writing known unto them, and that they might not attempt in vain to turn it over. In the meantime there came out a little child, about six or seven years of age, and turned it over without assistance, to the admiration of every person who was standing by. It was carried to the city of Iconium, and there published by a person belonging to Lady Cuba.

Of course I longed to possess one of them; later I did. When the old woman died her things were divided amongst her daughters. I went one day, thinking probably they might be willing to dispose of one or two of the things upon which I had set my heart. Everything of any value was gone—sold directly; but the old Bible still lay upon the table, and the Saviour's Letters were inside. A tentatively expressed wish to have one of them, and a suggestion that a price should be named, was met with instant assurance from the daughter that she would not think of selling it, but would be happy to give it to me. I demurred—it was "most kind of her," but—"oh, no," again, she would not think of selling it—if I would accept it; I did so, with many thanks. Since then I have learned that anything in the nature of a charm must on no account be sold, but always given; the former course of action is most unlucky. I would not for a moment detract from the generosity of the giver of the broadside; the poor are generous, and often love to give little gifts, but in this case I have a suspicion that the generosity may possibly have been prompted by the superstition.

I have heard many quaint stories of the Ananias and Sapphira type, of sudden retribution, in Berkshire, told seriously as positive facts. Here is one having reference to the bad luck, or even sin, supposed to be attached to the counting of certain things, as it was in the case recorded in the Bible of the numbering of the people. Two girls were walking together one

night; one of them counted the stars, and was struck dead instantly. The other got home safely.

There is unconscious humour, if also some profanity, in the following tale. Two men were going through a field of wheat on a spring day. One of them remarked, "This is a fine field of wheat." "Yes," replied the other, "if God A'mighty ull let it bide." And at harvest-time the field of wheat was standing in exactly the same stage as upon that day in spring!

A terrible warning to the user of bad language is contained in the two next stories. A man was throwing ashes in a field, when some of them were blown into his eyes. He cursed with anger, and was struck dead immediately. He could not be moved from the spot where he lay, even with horses, so had to be bricked over where he died. The other has the same moral. A girl one day was combing her hair; it was tangled. She cursed the hair, and Him that made it, and was struck dead. When they went to bury her the coffin seemed extraordinarily light; when it was opened to find out the reason, it was found to be full of smoke. The Devil, you see, in both cases had asserted his authority and claimed his own.

CHAPTER XVI

BLEWBURY

"GO straight along through the *postes* down the lane, and you'll see the church straight a'front of you," is the direction given perhaps to the stranger inquiring his way in Blewbury. It sounds simple enough, and cheerfully starting off, through some *postes* he will go, meditating perhaps as he does so upon the old Saxon termination with its savour of Chaucer. But the church tower is too low to form a landmark, and the *postes*—well, very soon the bewildered stranger comes to the conclusion that Blewbury is full of *postes*, that they all lead into lanes, that the lanes in some mysterious manner all lead to the same place eventually, like the paths in a maze; finally, that Blewbury is quite the most puzzling, if not also the most fascinating little village in Berkshire.

In Blewbury one is always breaking the tenth commandment. It would be easy enough, I have not the slightest doubt, to break there each and every commandment contained in either or both of the Tables of the Law, had one a mind so to do; but the tenth command-

ment, as regards one item of it, your neighbour's house, it is absolutely impossible to keep. The outside of those picturesque Elizabethan cottages is temptation enough; the interiors of some of them make one feel quite sure that the tenth commandment was made on purpose to be broken—once, at any rate. Having accepted the courteous invitation to "step in" that was given me by one kindly old lady, I gave expression to the feelings that were overcoming me. The day was hot, the roads extremely dusty, the glare of their white surface made my eyes ache, when suddenly I was transported into the dim light of a cool room—marvellously cool, because of the creeper-covered windows, with low rafters and red-brick floor, an oak dresser covered with shining blue china, a grandfather clock and oak table. A sweet scent of flowers came in at the open door, and a soothing sound of bees from a swarm that had taken possession of the roof, just over the porch. And that modern longing which may be described as wanting to "eat one's cake and have it," in other words, to seize all the sweets and reject all the disagreeables, took possession of me. I thought what an ideal "week-end" cottage this one would make, or little place to come down to in the summer, when one happened to be tired of the noise and bustle of London, and desired rest and quiet. And I put my thoughts into words: "I *should* like to have a cottage like this." The moment the words were uttered I saw they might well bear misinterpretation. That to the dear old lady who had lived in the cottage for so many years, not

only in the glorious summer, when the flowers were bright in the garden, when the sun shone and everything looked gay, but also in the dreary winter, when the snow lay heaped up round the doorway, when the evenings closed in early and the wind howled, and the rain beat up against the windows in the dark—to the dear old inmate of the cottage her little home might seem to be to me a veritable Naboth's vineyard.

"Ah! but I haven't done with it yet," she said, with a quaintness that almost brought the tears to my eyes; "we're some rare old stickers here."

I hastened to assure her that there was nothing of the spirit of the covetous king in me; that I hoped she would live for many years to come, and that it was only the beauty of her cottage which had forced me to make the remark. We had a good laugh over it together; they have a rare sense of humour, some of these old village people, though the quality may be lacking in the younger ones amongst them. "Ah, well, you can never tell," she said; "a while ago I was that shaky I thought to myself, 'I shan't be 'ere long; now I feel quite myself again. Well, you can say that you have met a very funny old woman this afternoon," she added, with a dry quaintness. And we parted, both laughing together as she opened the little garden gate for me. Dear old body, may she live for many more years to enjoy her sweet little home! Humanly speaking she probably will; she looked healthy and rosy, and the Blewbury people live to a great age.

As I said before, the ways of arriving at the church appear to be endless; it might almost be the centre of a maze with little paths and lanes leading through *postes* to it from all directions. A beautiful old church it is; the Blewbury people need no inquisitive stranger with a smattering, or even a knowledge of architecture to inform them of that fact. Because its tower is so low you come upon the church almost unexpectedly. It is like a gem embedded in a beautiful setting. All its surroundings are perfect. There is the old yew-tree embracing much of the graveyard within the shadow of its branches. Those branches are fewer now than they were a year ago; the late snow of Easter, 1908, which will not quickly be forgotten, worked sad havoc among them. It is a grand old tree still. Quite within its shadow is the school, an inscription over the door announcing that it was built and endowed by the gift of one William Malthus, merchant, *anno dom.* 1709. The beginning of the eighteenth century saw also another gift made to Blewbury—one of those gifts that is apt to make even the disinterested person think in a very kindly way of the giver. It is in the form of a little creeper-covered cottage standing actually in the churchyard, and was given by Mr. James Bacon in memory of his son Middleton and his daughter Ann, as an almshouse for the "oldest man in the village."

"The oldest man"—these are the words of the will, and herein lies a tragedy, which for some reason kind Mr. Bacon failed to anticipate—or perhaps there was

ALMSHOUSE, BLEWBURY.

[*To face page* 178.

some mistake made in the wording of the will. The oldest man in the village has a wife; it must have so happened over and over again during the hundred and seventy years that have elapsed since the cottage was first given; and the old wife as she sits sewing by the open door in summer, or by the fire in winter, often thinks of the time when perhaps she may have to leave her little home just at the time when she will be most needing it. Sometimes the thought finds expression in words: "I hope I shall be taken first." She need have no fear, for though it is true, if her husband goes first, she cannot stay in the cottage, she will not be allowed to want, or go to the workhouse. One cannot help wishing that she might know it, and so her mind be set at rest.

The churchyard is practically her garden; death must be a familiar thought to her, and the old tombstones as much a part of her daily life as her own table and chairs. One there is not far from her door with a quaint inscription: "In memory of Ambrose Pope, who died in his age, and was buried Jan. 4, 1687—

> "Stay a little, stand and spend a tear
> Upon ye dust that slumbers here,
> And what thou reads here ye fate of me
> Think on ye glass that runs for thee."

Twice in one year, and three times altogether, John Wesley preached in Blewbury Church. In May, 1746, he rode all the way from Bath and preached in the evening on the text: "For I am not ashamed of the

gospel; for it is the power of God unto salvation; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek." In bitter weather in the following January he rode across the Downs from Reading, reaching Blewbury in such a half-frozen condition that he hardly knew whether he had any hands or feet.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there arrived at Blewbury a man who, during his sojourn of forty-three years in the place, contrived to earn a somewhat unenviable notoriety. In 1781 John Keble, the father of the author of the "Christian Year," was presented with the living of Blewbury, and having already the living of Coln St. Aldwyn's, in Wiltshire, where he resided, he appointed as his curate-in-charge of his second parish the Rev. Morgan Jones. This man became known as the Blewbury miser. Wonderful stories are told about him and his penuriousness. The life of his hat he lengthened by sewing upon it the brim of another one which he found lying discarded in a hedge, and the coat which he possessed when he first came to the village he managed, by judicious patching and mending, and by now and then transferring a piece from the tail to the upper part, to make serve until his final departure from Blewbury. This coat has become historic; it now hangs in a glass case in the house of a member of the family which has possessed it for generations. Bread, bacon, and tea, the "two necessaries and a luxury," which constituted the food of Mr. Jones, must have agreed with him; his health was excellent; the whole time he was in

Blewbury he was absent from the church only upon two Sundays. And considering that he managed to keep the whole of his expenses within the exceedingly moderate sum of two and sixpence a week, the amount consumed of those two necessaries and a luxury even must have been curtailed. He had plans for supplementing his meals, it is true, at the same time combining friendly intercourse with his parishioners with economy. One hospitable farmer in particular received a good deal of attention. Mr. Jones would go one day to the house to order 4 lbs. of bacon and remain to tea and supper; upon another day he went to fetch the bacon and again stayed to tea and supper; on the third day, when the bacon was paid for, the two meals were once more included in the transaction. Tradition does not relate whether in any or every case the invitation was self-given, or whether the hospitality of the host caused him to rise nobly to each occasion. Many, various, and even ingenious were his methods for reducing his expenditure. For fuel he was often seen in the churchyard collecting the blackberry briars which in those days were used for decorating and binding the graves. Sermon paper he considered altogether an unnecessary extravagance. His sermons, amounting to over one thousand, were written upon any scrap of paper that came to hand: the backs of old marriage banns, posting bills, old proclamations, tax papers, scraps of brown paper, blue paper, sand paper. For one of his funeral sermons he utilised the spaces of a letter of Mr. Keble's relating to some

parish matters which happened to arrive at the time. History omits to relate whether Mr. Jones preached extemporarily, or whether all these heterogeneous morsels of paper were taken up into the pulpit. At any rate a collection of them still exists and is kept in a box as a curiosity by a member of an old Blewbury family.

No wonder that neither of the two ladies to whom he was consecutively attracted reciprocated the feeling, or at any rate that they feared to embark upon life in company with the miser. He never married; had he done so the lady, one imagines, would have run serious risks of death by starvation, for his habits were probably too ingrained for any wife, however persuasive, to alter them.

Even a general public emotion failed to stir him to any inclination to part with his beloved money. At the time of the Battle of Waterloo, sermons were preached from almost every pulpit, and house-to-house collections were made for the widows and orphans of the slain. Mr. Jones preached a thrilling sermon for the cause. The next day those who were collecting for the fund called upon him, and asked him for a subscription. He declined at first, but being pressed, gave half a crown, a good deal of further pressure drew forth almost with tears a second half-crown, but when the collectors tried to induce him to make his subscription ten shillings he indignantly ordered them out of the house. Had they forgotten his sermon of the day before, and the liberal sum it had produced?

—that was his contribution to the cause, he would give nothing more.

Yet, in spite of his eccentricities, he appears to have been loved by his parishioners; many of them shed tears when he preached his farewell sermon upon the text, "Finally, my brethren, farewell, be perfect, be of good comfort, live in peace, and the God of love and peace shall be with you." Poor old man! the pathos and futility which must be attached to the end of a miser's life clung to the end of his. The money he had scraped and saved, skimping and denying himself and others every comfort and pleasure for the sake of hoarding, went to those who would probably have grudged him even a crust had the money not existed.

His stipend was only £50 per annum; about £30 per annum came to him from a small property which had been left to him by a relation; his surplice fee amounted to two and sixpence per week, and upon this last minute sum he had contrived to live. It seems almost incredible, but the compound interest on his money when he was eighty years old amounted to £18,000. And now he longed for rest, and his mind turned towards his native country, Wales. He yearned to go to Llandovey, saying that "the hunted stag would fain return to die where he was first roused." Some relatives were communicated with; one of them arrived at Blewbury. She showed no friendly feeling when she saw the old man absolutely in rags, and looking like a beggar; she began immediately to make

excuses. "Llandovey was a long way off, and the journey expensive; where the tree fell, there it had to lie; it really did not signify where he was buried." She would have gone away at once, leaving her old relation to die in the solitude in which he had lived, had not some one given her a hint as to what the miser was worth. She suddenly changed her mind. "We will return to Llandovey by to-morrow's light," she declared eagerly. And so they did, leaving behind them the historic coat and the old list slippers. The old man died in Wales very soon afterwards, and the mercenary relative and her son inherited his money.

There is a station at Upton, one mile and a half from Blewbury, connecting it with the Great Western Railway and Didcot. There are only four trains in a day, and as it is a single line, you may have to sit patiently waiting for the space of twenty minutes or even longer for the train; the time of its departure is extremely erratic. However, eventually you reach Didcot, and get a fast train to London, so Blewbury cannot be said at the present time to be cut off from civilisation.

In the beginning of the last century the London coach went through the village three times a week, starting at eleven o'clock from the "Angel" in St. Clement's, stopping at "White Horse Cellars" in Piccadilly, and so on to Wantage. There was also a wagon which started on Tuesdays and Fridays respectively at 4 p.m., from the "Oxford Arms" in Warwick Lane, and the "Swan" on Holborn Bridge. A

quaint allusion to this coach is made in an old diary kept by a Blewbury farmer at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The writer was evidently in the habit of noting the fruits of his experience for future profit and practice. "Never want," he counsels himself, "any company to London; it is the least expense to go by yourself. Go to the office and get booked, and never wait for road chances, you may chance to walk too far, Martin and I did. Always take an umbrella," he adds, having doubtless suffered from the neglect of his maxim. Apparently he considered that confession was good for the soul. "Sow the vetches," he goes on, "sooner, where the dung heap is to go; dung and finish off all cart if possible, if it is in good order. Never mind being late—could have finished wheat cart in one more hour but did not, the next morning was wet; only left one load." The technicality of these last self-instructions will appeal only to the initiated. The document was probably intended only for the eyes of the writer; there is a dry truthfulness in its wording. The expression "going to cart" is still used, and in this part of the country you hear the little boys talking about it when school breaks up in August, and they are looking forward to earning some pennies for their money-boxes or for sweets by helping the farmers with the harvest by "going to cart."

Right in the village of Blewbury stands a red-brick house. It is a very ordinary-looking little house, yet it has received a good deal of attention, not for the

sake of itself, but for its swinging sign. Now, in this twentieth century, if any man had ventured to paint such a sign, I feel quite sure that every woman, even in the remote village Blewbury, would have felt that she owed it as a duty to her sex to make it what is commonly called "too hot" for him. Certainly he would not have dared to show his face when once that sign had been exposed to view. It is called the "Load of Mischief," and the Load of Mischief is a woman; the bearer of the burden a man, presumably her husband. This woman, a most disagreeable virago, is sitting "piggyback" upon the man's shoulders in company with a monkey and a magpie—the moral evidently intended being that a woman, a monkey, and a magpie are all equally troublesome and mischievous, and to be avoided. In her hand the woman holds a glass of gin, in the background of the picture is a public-house called "Cuckhold's Fortune," on the right-hand side the pawnshop of S. Gripe, which a carpenter is entering to pledge his tools. The original of this curious design, which hangs upon an old inn in London, is said to be by Hogarth, and to be mentioned in the lease of the house as one of the fixtures; how the replica found its way to Blewbury is a mystery, and we will not insult the Blewburians by imagining for one moment that the model for its unpleasant heroine was discovered in their midst.

However, upon other occasions the inhabitants of the village have formed subjects for pictures, the result proving not always satisfactory to the models. This

was the case, at any rate, in one memorable instance. The artist had painted two old bodies talking over a cottage garden gate. The fact of being painted pleased them well enough, and all went well until the picture was exhibited in London. "The Gossips," the name of the picture, presently reached the old ladies' ears, but when it was too late to alter it; their indignation at being, as they considered, so maligned, was immense.

Luke Fildes found the models for his "Village Wedding" in Blewbury. It was, in fact, a real country wedding party, and the members of it were doubtless immensely flattered at "having their likenesses took," although the poor bridegroom endured great discomfort during the operation. His face grew whiter and whiter, and the artist inquired at last if he were not feeling well. "I do find it such a job a 'olding of my breath," he burst out, with an explosion of relief at being able to speak. His only experience of portraiture had been a cheap daguerreotype, during the taking of which, to ensure perfect immobility, he had been told to hold his breath.

Tradition at Blewbury tells of dark deeds having been done in old times at one of the little inns of the village, at which one it is not quite clear, and it would be unkind and invidious to hint at any house in particular; but the story goes that a certain landlord used to rob and murder his guests, disposing of their bodies in some mysterious manner. The unquiet ghosts of the victims of such a horrible breach of hospitality ought surely, according to all accepted

superstitions, to haunt the house; however, upon this point tradition, as far as I know, is silent.

In these days, when the world, one hopes and believes, has grown more humane, it is difficult to credit the story of a poor lunatic woman having been chained to the bed-post in her house. Nevertheless, it is a well-authenticated fact. The blacksmith is actually still living who forged the chains, and a member of an old Blewbury family has told me that his mother well remembered as a child of five years old being for some reason taken to the poor woman's cottage. The terror she experienced upon hearing the dreadful sound of the chains rattling never quite faded from her memory.

All this is gloomy enough, but there was a lighter side to the life of the village in those old days. The world was younger then, more easily amused, or perhaps there existed more of the zest of life, when practical jokes were constantly being played. Some of these jokes, it is true, were of a cruel and dangerous nature, and society certainly benefits by their discontinuance. On the other hand, many were harmless, and contained a certain spice of humour, rough and ready, no doubt, but humour nevertheless. And a good hearty laugh at an innocent joke that hurt nobody must have been good for the village people, I think. However, be that as it may, I fancy that old Martin, upon whom one of these practical jokes was played, in the end probably joined in the laugh against himself. He was an old basket-maker, who went round from place to place and farm to farm to repair anything of

the nature of wicker-work, sieves or baskets, or chairs, that chanced to be broken. One day he arrived at a certain farm, tied up his pony and cart, and was busily engaged upon the various articles requiring his attention which were brought to him by the different labourers. Now, it so happened that these labourers had an idle time just then, it being too wet for them to get upon the land for ploughing. So, while old Martin was busily at work, it occurred to them that the basket-maker might be made the subject of some fun. They found his pony tied to a door-handle happily munching a meal of coarse hay. Their first act was to unharness the animal from the cart; then they removed the wheels from it, after which, by dint of a good deal of turning and twisting, the body of the cart was got inside the barn. Their next piece of work was to put the wheels back upon the cart and harness the pony, after which they all climbed up and hid themselves in the *tallet*, prepared to thoroughly enjoy the sport when old Martin came and found out what had happened. They had to wait for some time, but not long enough to cool their ardour in the anticipation of the fun. Presently old Martin's work was finished, and he wished to get on to the next farm. Great was his dismay when neither pony nor cart could be found. After a vain search he peeped inside the barn, and joyfully discovered his lost property. Then came the problem how to get the horse and cart out of the barn; if it had gone in, it could be got out again; but, then, how it got in remained a mystery, and how

to get it out again was an equal one. Old Martin gave it up: it was beyond his powers of solution. At last a loud laugh resounding from the *tallet* proclaimed the fact that he was not alone, and the young labourers, thoroughly satisfied with the success of their joke, climbed down to the old man's assistance.

A victim of a somewhat similar and equally innocent kind of prank was a certain Malachi Grace, who kept the New Inn at Blewbury. Malachi, who was a carrier to Wallingford, had an unfortunate propensity for visiting inns other than his own upon the road—unfortunate because, though the visits in themselves were harmless enough, Malachi found it necessary to do a great deal for the good of the house he visited, which was to his own detriment. One day he had been feeling particularly sociable, and the consequence was that presently the horse was leisurely making his way homewards, stopping occasionally to munch the grass by the roadside, while all the time the master reposed peacefully at the bottom of the van fast asleep. The situation was discovered by some young labourers, who, ready and willing for a joke, took the horse out of the van, drew the latter with Malachi still asleep in it into a barn, and secreted themselves to watch for developments. Presently it grew dark, Malachi woke up, rubbed his eyes, looked about him, and gave utterance to the following somewhat cryptic remark: "Is my name Malachi Grace? because if it is I've lost a horse; if 't'aint, I've found a cart."

But the playing of practical jokes was by no means confined to the labourers; the following is the story of one, the author of which was a Blewbury farmer and the victim a tailor of the same village. This tailor had received an order from a neighbouring squire to make him a particular kind of shooting coat. It was to contain a number of specially large pockets to hold game, for in those days sportsmen carried their own bag, not considering a man to do so for them a necessary adjunct to a day's shooting. The order received by the tailor was apparently one of unusual importance, and was much boasted of amongst his friends and customers. Amongst the latter was a young farmer, who, as the tailor had happened to mention to him the day and hour arranged for the fitting on of the coat, determined to have some amusement. He waited for the man to pass his house with the wonderful coat in a parcel, and called out to him over the hedge, "My missus wants you to measure one of the children for a suit of clothes." Delighted with the prospect of another order, the tailor went into the house, put his parcel down in the hall, and was shown into a room, where he spent some minutes in measuring the farmer's little boy. Meanwhile the farmer quickly undid the parcel, abstracted the wonderful coat, and substituted for it one of his wife's flannel petticoats. Later, arrived at the squire's, the tailor proceeded to unpack the parcel, his face beaming all the time with conscious pride while he dilated upon the merits of the marvellous

garment. He was sure the squire would be pleased with it; he had put a pocket here and a pocket there; the thing when finished would be an enormous success. The parcel was opened; the change of expression upon the tailor's face took place more rapidly than can be described. "I'll drop it into my apprentice, young rascal!" he spluttered, purple with rage. "I'll teach him to play me jokes like this!" And off he went as fast as his legs would carry him, intending to give the apprentice an unpleasant time of it. The farmer was on the look-out for him. "My missus wants you to measure the other little boy," he called out, as the tailor hurried past, fuming with suppressed fury. Here was balm in Gilead. The tailor halted, the apprentice and the meditated vengeance were forgotten for a few minutes. He went into the house and proceeded to take the order. In the meantime the farmer took the flannel petticoat out of the parcel, returned the coat, and tied it up again. The tailor hurried forth presently again, hurling expletives at the head of the innocent apprentice. It was no use his professing ignorance of the matter; the proof of his impudence was here—here in the parcel; the coat had been taken out and the flannel petticoat, &c., &c. With fingers that trembled with fury he untied the string. Let us hope for his own sake that the mystified apprentice made good his escape at the opportune moment and at any rate indulged in his laughter in private.

The visible signs of an industry long since fallen

into decay and disuse may be seen in the old malt-house that stands in one of the picturesque lanes of Blewbury. The beams and rafters of the great building, gaunt and strange, are like the framework of a skeleton from which the life has departed. These beams and rafters are so low in the great vault-like building that the maltsters had to work with their backs bent double. Many tons of malt were made in the old malt-house when beer was often home-made, or at any rate was composed chiefly of malt and hops. Now the brewer makes his own malt, and the old maltster perhaps has had time to forget his regret that his labour in that direction is no longer needed and that the money for malt no longer finds its way into his pocket.

Of the fact that in former days there were tanneries in Blewbury there are curious evidences in some old walls composed partly of the horns of the animals that were slain. Unless it were pointed out, or you happened to examine the walls very closely, their strange formation would certainly not be apparent. In the usual local manner the top portion is made of mud and thatched. The lower part is composed of horns, hundreds of them, all closely packed together, their surface now white and powdery from the action of the lime with which they have been plastered and the weather. One shudders to think of the massacres that must have taken place, of the hundreds of these poor animals that have lent portions of their bodies to "keep the wind away." Blewbury, at any rate,

is a sweeter and a pleasanter place now that the tanneries have ceased to exist. One would so much rather think of the watercress-beds as a source of income to the inhabitants of the village. The little streams have been utilised and artificial watercourses made, and for many years there has been a market for the delicious green plant that grows thickly in them. "Blewbury watercresses," I have been told, are still cried in London, but that is a fact I cannot vouch for; I only know that, having bought them in Blewbury, I have taken them to London myself, and that I have never tasted better ones.

So the old order changeth, sometimes for the worse perhaps for the village people, sometimes for the better, for the everlasting law of compensation holds good everywhere and at all times. There is no window tax to pay in these days, a considerable burden at one time. An old bill of 1845, "Received of Mr. Costiff Two Pounds three shillings and three pence for half a year's Window Duty, on account of the Trustees of Matthews' Charity, signed Edward Humphrey, Collector," is sufficient evidence of this fact. The payment of £4 6s. 6d. per annum half-yearly called forth, one may be sure, its tribute of grumbling every six months; in many cases, doubtless, it was the cause of real privation.

Thinking of the glories of the battle of Ashdown and all that it meant to Britain, one cannot wonder that the site of the battle is disputed, and that the inhabitants of different parts of the country have wished to claim it for their own. To the east of

Blewbury and the west of Cholsey is a raised promontory called the King's Standing Ground, which is said to have been the position fixed upon by Æthelred and Alfred for their encampment upon the second night after the battle of Reading and the one after Ashdown. The great battle is said to have taken place in Blewbury Bottom. Antiquaries support this belief, and say that Mr. Hughes was quite wrong when he declared that the battle took place in his part of the country near the White Horse. The White Horse they assume to be probably very much older than the time of Ashdown, and belonging more likely to pagan ages. The belief that the great battle took place near Blewbury is further suggested by the fact that innumerable Saxon relics have been, and are constantly being dug up all round this neighbourhood—coins, battleaxe heads, and even skeletons. And nestling in a peaceful nook surrounded by cornfields, and swelling upland covered with clover, over which on an August afternoon clouds of white butterflies dart and hover, is a little church that possesses a peculiar interest. In this church of Aston Upthorpe tradition says that King Æthelred knelt in prayer upon the morning of the great battle, his younger and braver brother Alfred being already upon the field of action. More and more urgent grew the moment, yet the saying of the Mass continued, and until the priest had ended King Æthelred remained. Once more, tradition says, he returned to the little church; this time he was accompanied by his brother Alfred, the great, the

noble, and the true. The Danes had been beaten back, the battle of Ashdown fought and won, the sweet countryside was reeking with blood, the dead in thousands strewed the ground; but Britain was free, the invaders were driven back; comparative peace was to reign. So the two princely brothers knelt in the little church and gave thanks for the victory.*

Now it is August and the Yeomanry are upon the Downs, and the sound of horses' hoofs is heard in the village. Khaki-clad riders clatter down the lanes and little streets. Women hurry to their cottage doors to see them, or wander up to the camp on Sunday or in the evening. Church parade is a great attraction, especially to the little boys, who find it a much more interesting and exciting form of religion than Sunday School. There are meetings and greetings at many a farmhouse, when an old friend who has not been seen for some time, some nephew, or cousin, or other relation, who is out with the Yeomanry, suddenly appears upon the scene. There is much Dicking and Toming and Harrying, and handshaking, and a stirrup cup of beer or cider is not refused by the visitor.

This looks pleasant and gay. The old horse with a strained back that is toiling painfully and slowly up the village street with a queer twisted motion, could he speak, would tell you a different story; he sees the

* The kindly and courteous old gentleman who has been rector of the little church for so many years is himself an antiquary, and testifies to his belief that this part of the country was the site of the battle of Ashdown.

reverse side of the picture. His master has accepted a Government contract for conveying the luggage of the Yeomanry from the station. The van has been left up on the Downs for unloading, and the old horse is wearily making his way there to fetch it back again —very reluctantly indeed, he does try so hard to escape. His master stops for a few minutes to gossip with some acquaintance; his attention is engaged, and when he looks round the old horse has disappeared and is half-way down the street towards home. He is captured and made to walk on again, only to take the very next opportunity which offers itself to attempt an escape. His master is a haulier, and the stables and yards of the various farmhouses are well known to the old horse. One of these yards possesses the special attraction of a large drinking-trough. The water is green, and has certainly not a tempting appearance, but the old horse shuffles in at the gate, which happens to be open, and very soon his nose is buried in it. The master allows him to drink, leads him out with considerable patience, it must be said, and starts him off again. Poor old horse! the last glimpse I got of him he was pathetically gazing into another farmyard and once more being driven on by the haulier. I suppose they both eventually reached their destination, the camp; the getting himself there seemed to prove a difficult enough task to the old horse, the return journey, with the additional burden of his van and his master, loomed as an almost impossible one—to me, at any rate. The haulier himself

had not found the business a joyful one. "There were too many masters up there," he said, "it were difficult to please them"; and experience had taught him the power of silence, "the best thing was to say nothing to 'em."

In Blewbury, many, if not most, of the cottages are thatched, and the thatcher still finds plenty of employment. It is pleasant to stop for a few minutes and watch him at work. He is standing upon a ladder that leans against the wall of a pretty, raftered cottage. Its garden is gay with late summer flowers. The sun shines on the golden straw as the thatcher lays great heaps of it upon the brown weather-stained roof, tucks it in, and fastens it firmly down. It looks such easy work, but so does everything that is done by the practised craftsman. Try your prentice hand at thatching; you will not find it so simple. There are only a limited number of good thatchers to be found anywhere now.

One could wish that the cow bells were still to be heard in the villages of the Downs. They must have sounded sweetly, and it surely was a pretty sight to see the cows wending their way to their various homes as the evening closed in. There is still a road called the Cow Road leading to the Downs at Blewbury. Before the enclosure of the parish in 1805, each householder had the right of grazing, and it was customary for an old man or a boy to ring a large bell to call in all the cows. This was a more convenient and economical plan than that each owner should summon his own.

So all the cows answered to the one bell, and found their respective homes. The quaint old village cow bell is still in existence, having been preserved for generations in a Blewbury family. It is made of wrought iron, and is of a long, narrow shape, ten inches high and six inches wide across the mouth.

Bells, indeed, have played a considerable part in the life of Blewbury. The grand old peal of six in the church tower, to which two more have been added in modern times, still pour out a beautiful stream of sound through the village, though bell-ringing is not now what it was in the old time. The effect, doubtless, is much the same, but it is arrived at in a quicker and easier manner—bell-ringing is not physically such strenuous work, and perhaps for this reason there is not quite the same love for and pride in their bells amongst the ringers. They still go round with the handbells at Christmas-time; the rest of the year the small copper bells, brightly polished, are suspended by their leather straps to a wooden beam that hangs on a rafter in one of the cottages. It is the cottage of the oldest man among the ringers, and while each pair of bells is the property of its respective ringer, they remain collectively in the care of the veteran; they have become part and parcel of that little raftered room, and are missed by the inmates when taken down for the Christmas ringing. The old ringer's young daughter has learnt to play hymns upon them, striking out the notes with a small leather-headed stick. She plays them some-

times in the dusk, and finds it easier then. There may be a reason for this. The sound of bells, like the music of a waltz, possesses an inherent and subtle sadness that seems specially suited to the evening-time. This may be the reason why a certain element of romance has always clung to the curfew bell. It is still rung at Blewbury. Beginning upon October 12th, old Michaelmas Day, it is rung every night at eight o'clock all through the winter months, until old Lady Day. Formerly a bell was rung also at four o'clock in the morning, but that practice has been discontinued, chiefly owing to the complaints of an old Vicar, who was roused from his best sleep by it, and found it difficult or impossible to get off again.

In some parts of England the custom of ringing a bell at four o'clock and six o'clock in the morning is still kept up. It is the old pig bell, and the meaning of it in former times was that between these hours the pigs of the village were let loose, and permitted to scour the streets and devour the offal and rubbish that was thrown out of the cottages. The four o'clock bell at Blewbury is said to have borne a pleasanter interpretation, and to have been the summons to the cowmen and carters to begin their work. This may or may not be so. It is a curious fact that stories and legends are apt to collect round a custom or belief the reason for which is lost in antiquity. The ringing of the eight o'clock curfew bell at Blewbury is an instance of this. The origin of this custom everywhere has been attributed to the order that

was issued in Norman times, the *couvre-feu.* The real meaning of the curfew bell probably belongs to a much more ancient and pagan date, but, as even the necessity for the Norman mandate has been forgotten (though some of the old folk still take it as their summons to bed), another reason better adapted to later and more modern times has been invented. Some traveller, it is said, who was lost upon the Downs in the darkness of a winter evening, after wandering helplessly about for hours, at length found his bearings through the Blewbury Church bell ringing, perhaps for evening service. And recognising the usefulness and value of the familiar sound, for the benefit of other benighted travellers in the same need of guidance, he left a sum of money to pay for the ringing of the bell every evening during the dark months. This is the story. But no sum of money has ever been so left, and no special fee is paid for the ringing of the curfew bell in Blewbury. The task devolves upon the sexton, is part of his duty, and a somewhat irksome one he finds it occasionally, when his business takes him away for any distance from the village, and he either has to hurry back or else to provide a substitute. There are so few places now in which the old custom of the curfew is carried on that one cannot help hoping it will not be discontinued at Blewbury. If some reason must needs be found for the practice in these utilitarian days, there is the story of the traveller upon the Downs. It is true that now in these days of

railways, even lost travellers upon the Downs must be extremely few and far between, though perhaps an occasional one does still welcome the sound of the curfew bell. Of the romance and picturesqueness of the old custom there can be no question. Who can tell for how many generations and centuries the curfew bell has sounded the close of day for that little community of human beings forming the village of Blewbury? Each time the sun has set, and the veil of darkness been drawn over the joys and sorrows, the tragedies and romances of that little place, the bell from the old church tower has sounded a solemn knell, thus linking the life of the present with that of the past, and forging a continuous chain of continuity.

"The curfew calls thee ere too late
Cover the fires of angry hate;
Let not bright day have cheerless end,
The sun upon thy wrath descend.

And whensoe'er the curfew bell
Thy vital fire extinct shall tell,
Oh, mayst thou from Life's Compline time
Wake to the everlasting Prime."

CHAPTER XVII

SCRAPS OF VILLAGE LIFE

THERE is something that is pathetic in the faith the country poor have in "the Goverment." In the large towns those of the same class may be deceived by election cries and promises—so indeed are all classes; they hope, doubtless, for reforms, changes of condition which cannot happen suddenly, but may possibly, and probably will be effected by the slow march of evolution; but the poorer classes of the towns are near the centre of things, they hear them discussed and talked about, difficulties are realised, and doubts are thrown upon things, so they have less of the simple faith of the country people in the ruling power. To the latter the "Goverment" is a power of mysterious import, possessed of an almost godlike omnipotence. Liberal or Conservative, it is all the same to them: a personal amelioration of their hardships and sufferings is what they are always patiently waiting for; as each Government goes out, they experience disappointment, as each new one comes in, they hope again; until at last frequent failure of the hope's fulfilment

tends to an apathetic resignation to the decrees of that power whose rulings are to them as mysterious and irrevocable as those of Deity.

But their feelings concerning the local government are altogether of a different nature. This body is regarded, if not with indifference, at any rate with a certain well-meaning familiarity. Its members are in their midst, the villagers know all about them. The failings and foibles or capabilities of the local butcher or baker are wrapt in no cloak of mystery, and as no man is a prophet in his own country, when the butcher or the baker come into office, they are respected or not according to their various characters of popularity or generosity, but they are certainly endowed with no miraculous powers, and no impossibilities are expected of them.

The attribute of generosity, in as far as its meaning signifies the giving of material things, carries considerable weight in the obtaining of votes. "Where yer gives yer dripping, there yer can get yer vote," was the answer to the wife of a local butcher who was canvassing for her husband as a councillor. The author of the terse rejoinder was an old woman who had been nursing jealousy for some time. For some reason, good or mistaken, none of the coveted dripping had come her way. Here was her opportunity for revenge, and she intended taking it. Private animosities and private likes and dislikes must and will come into the question of local franchise—candidates and electors are both human, and in a

small country place temperaments and interests are certain to collide.

From the local government no great things are expected; it is "*the* Goverment" that can, "an it will." Now the Old Age Pensions Bill is passed; the news has reached the villages; as yet it has awakened no enthusiasm among the inhabitants, substantial and material demonstration of the fact is first necessary. And the thing means so much to them all.

"I would be quite content if I could have ten shillings a week to keep me and my missus." Old William Horne's ejaculation as I sat in their cottage one spring afternoon voices the sentiment that fills the souls of thousands. He and his wife are a pair of ideal country cottagers, their lives wrapped in all the poetry and pathos that is wont to surround these simple existences. Their birthdays are both upon the same day; they are devoted to each other with the devotion that is bred of mutual interdependence, and the endurance of privation and the fighting of difficulties together. Their "duty to the State," as it is called, they have certainly done. For with infinite struggle they have reared a large family, and sent them out into the world for good or evil. The old man has worked on the road for a scanty wage the greater part of his life, and is bent almost double from the incessant stooping. He earns a small wage from a farmer now, and goes bravely toiling on still. Sometimes the inmost longing of his heart finds

expression in those words: "If only I had ten shillings a week to keep me and my missus, I should be quite content." That being so, he thinks, they could go on living in their sweet creeper-clad cottage till the end; he could work in the garden and grow potatoes and cabbages, they would have their home, and could keep themselves in food—indeed, they would be "passing rich."

The coming election of councillors in the village troubled old Horne and his wife but little, if indeed at all. They recognised the fact of their possession of a vote, also that this vote was of value to those who wanted it, that is, to the candidates. But otherwise the matter was regarded with a somewhat comical detachment, though William was not wanting in views upon the subject.

As I sat in the cottage upon the spring afternoon in question, a tall man came down the garden path.

"There's Mr. G.," said William, glancing out of the lattice window; "I can see what he's arter—canvassing, by the papers in his hand."

Mr. G. knocks at the door and comes in. He is a tall man with a hard face, and is dressed in a newish suit of the thick tweed worn by the tradesman class. Old William is quite correct in his surmise as to his errand. Mr. G. hands a card to the old man.

"These are the men we want to get in, and I think they will, too; they've got interests of their own at stake, and while they're working for themselves they'll work for other people."

"Ah!" retorted old William, ignoring the latter part of Mr. G.'s remark, "they're sure to work for theirsels."

There is a moment's pause, while old William glances carelessly down the list of names upon the card. "I hope you'll vote for all thirteen of them," remarks Mr. G.

"No, that I certainly shan't," grunted old William, "for there's a pretty many on that card as ain't worth nothing on't."

"These last that have been in," persisted Mr. G., nothing daunted by the cold water that is thrown upon his efforts—"these last have been throwing the money about—wastrels they call them." With that he leaves the cottage.

"I wish they'd throw some about where I could pick it up," retorts the old man as the canvasser disappears down the garden path. "Since this Liberal Goverment came in everything's got dearer—matches, sugar, everything. They promised to do a lot for the poor people; they can't any on 'em do nothing really. But there," he added, a twinkle in his eyes, the thought smiting him perhaps that he had unwittingly committed himself to too much—"there—you can vote how you likes when you gets inside the ballot box."

His old wife's looks follow him to the door, as he gets up presently and goes out. "You won't be long, father," she begs. "He's so contented," she goes on, turning to me—"so contented and willing to do

anything. He's gone now to go an errand for his master or something, but 'is back is that bad, every night we have to rub it with embrocation. We shan't be long after one another."

Poor old soul! she sits and worries somewhat by herself when he is out, wondering whether he will reach home safely; then he comes in and thinks she looks ill, and tells her not to worry. She was ill not long ago, and hurt her foot, and the accident pulled her down a good deal. The nail came off one of her toes, and with a curious superstition she keeps it carefully wrapped up in paper, perhaps to be buried with her. There is a strange idea amongst the cottage people that at the Resurrection their bodies will not be perfect should any portions of them have been missing from the rest on that Great Day. Foolishness, no doubt. Those who count themselves wise may smile contemptuously at it, and yet who can tell, in the light and revelation of such a Great Day, that the wisdom of the wise might not appear just as blind as the simple imaginings of these babes.

INDEX

ABINGDON, 29
,, in the Civil War, 33
,, supernatural appearances at, 31
Æthelred, King, 195
Agbarus of Edessa, letter of, 172
Aldermaston, 136, 139
,, Park, 140
Aldworth, 2
,, Church, 6
Alfred, King, 60, 81, 83, 86, 195
Architectural features, interesting, 25, 26, 27, 28, 35, 37, 38, 54, 55, 57, 58, 59, 63, 82, 101, 147, 193
Argeston, 58
Ashdown, Battle of, 86, 194
Aston Upthorpe, 195

BACKSWORDING, 162
Beche de la family tombs, 8
,, de la pedigree, 10
Betty Hicks, 136
Blewbury, 175
Bounds, beating the, 155
Boxford, 48
Bray, Vicar of, 169
Brimpton, 101
"Brown, Tom," 83, 160
Bucklebury, 36, 142
,, Common and pond, 148
,, Heath, 139
,, machinery riots at, 145

CHANDOS, Lord, his romantic marriage, 23
Chapel Row Fair, 164
Chaucer at Donnington Castle, 45
Cholsey, 195
Church, orchestra in, 11
Civil War in Berks, 29, 33, 38, 41, 46, 57, 61, 139
Compton, 2
Congreve the Dramatist, 140
Corbet, Richard, Dean of Christchurch, his amusing escapade, 29
Coscote, old house at, 25
Cottages, interesting, at West Hagbourne, 26
Cottington Hill, 108
Cow bells, 198

Crayfish catching, 103
Crookham Common, 97
Cross at East Hagbourne, 27
,, at Lambourne, 64
,, roadside, 25
Cumnor Hall, ghost at, 31
Curfew bell at Blewbury, 201

Danes in Lambourne Valley, 60
Diary of Blewbury farmer, 185
Didcot, 24, 184
Divination, 170
Dominis, Mark Antonio de, 15
Donnington Castle, 45
Downs, Berkshire, 50
Dudley, Lady, of Cunmor Hall, 30

Eastbury, 58
East Garston, 58
East Hagbourne, 24, 27
East Ilsley, 13
,, ,, Fair, 14, 15
East Shefford, 54
Eclipse, famous racehorse, 22
Enbourne river, 101

Fairs, 159
Falkland, Lord, death of, 41
Faringdon, 66
,, Blind House at, 80
Feasts, village, 159
Fettiplace, family, the, 54, 56
Firwoods, 134
Fleet prison, 153
Folk-lore, 169
Foreign competition, 38, 124
Funeral, apparition of, 157

Ghosts, 31, 157
Golf, 70
"Gossips, The," 187
Government, the, and the villages, 203
Grace Malachi, 190
Great Shefford, 57
Green paint and the Devil, 54
Gypsies, 136

Handbell ringing, 199
Head in alabaster at Lambourne, 64
Herbal remedies, 152
Hicks, Betty, 136
Hoop-cutting, 128
Horns of animals, walls of, 193
Hughes, Mr. Thomas, 83, 165
Hyde End, 101

Keat's Gore, 22
Keble, John, miser, 180

Lambourne, 62
Lambourne river, 49
,, Valley, 48
Lawrence Prior, 56
Load of Mischief, public-house sign, 186
Longcot, 88
Lunatic chained to bed-post, 188

Malthouse, old, 193
Manor-houses, 54, 57, 58, 64
Mary, a village woman, 113

Military manœuvres, recent, 62, 196
Mud walls, 25, 59

Newbury, 34
,, actors and actresses at, 44
,, and Civil War, 41
,, Cloth Hall, 38
,, decline of cloth trade in, 38
,, fifteenth-century house at, 36
,, Jack of, 35, 38
,, John Wesley, at, 43
,, Miles Coverdale in, 39
,, royal visits to, 36, 40
,, woman's marriage with Lord Chandos, 23

Old John, 150
Owl, the, a baker's daughter, 120

Paradise, 150
Pig bell, 200
Pigeon-house Farm, 59
Practical jokes, 188
Pye and his folly, 71
,, family, the, 76
,, Henry James, Poet Laureate, 78

Reading and Thomas Cole, 35
Revels, 160
Riddles, 119
Rod-beds, 122
Romany settlement, 136

Saviour's Letters, 172
Sayings of Berkshire, 169
Shaw House, Newbury, 37, 40
Sheep fair at East Ilsley, 14–22
Sheep skin for dying persons, 22
Smock-frocks, 19, 50, 151
Smuggling, 153
Stocks, the, 52, 81
Superstition, 170
Superstitions connected with sheep, 21
Sylvester, Joshua, poet, 53

Tadley, 136
Templars, preceptory, 101
Terry, Ellen, and smock-frock, 51
Thatching, the art of, 60, 198
"Tom Brown's School Days," 83, 160
Trout farm, 101

Uffingham, 83
Unton family, the, 72
Upton, 184

"Veasts," 160
Villages, social condition of, 55, 146
"Village Wedding," by Luke Fildes, 187

Wadley House, 72
Walking-sticks, carved by shepherds, 19
Wallingford, 24
Warts, cure for, 152
Watercresses at Blewbury, 194
Wesley at Blewbury Church, 179
West Hagbourne, 26
West Ilsley, 14
White Horse Hill, 86
White Horse, scouring the, 87
Wightwick, Richard, 14
Wilkins, Mrs., 172
Winchcombe, John the younger, 142
Window tax, 194
Windsor, family of, 26
Witches, 108, 116
Wizard at Crookham, 99
Wooden bowls, making of, 149
Wool placed in shepherd's coffin, 20

Yeomanry manœuvres, 196
Yew-tree at Aldworth, 7

UNWIN BROTHERS, LIMITED, THE GRESHAM PRESS, WOKING AND LONDON.

11/35